

Organizing a Silence and Solitude Day

I am an introvert who is contemplative. This means I crave and desperately need silence, solitude, study, prayer, and journaling because the Holy Spirit uses these moments to connect me to Jesus that I might be more like him. For those like me, organizing days for silence and solitude may come rather naturally. But for those who are extroverted and active, the people and tasks in their mind and life can keep them from having regular and productive times to fast from noise and people and to hear from God, speak to God, and be with God.

So, this blog is the first in a series that will help you organize a silence and solitude day. The series of blogs will culminate in a lengthy template I use to organize my own silence and solitude days. I shared this document with the Mars Hill staff and so many friends on Facebook and Twitter asked for it after hearing about it that I decided to write it up in brief form and give it away in hopes of being helpful.

Four Ways to Live Your Life

In his book *Leading On Empty*, Wayne Cordeiro says that there are only four ways to live your life:

1. Reaction – passively dominated by urgencies and pushy people
2. Conformity – succumbing to the fear of man and just being and doing what everyone else wants, which is not necessarily following God's will for you personally
3. Independence – nonconforming rebellion in the name of freedom, marked by doing only what you want and ignoring godly authority over you
4. Intentionality – reverse-engineering your life and living it prayerfully and purposefully, journaling your thoughts throughout the day, and using silence and solitude to hear from God and organize your life

Which one of these four most typifies you? Is your life a frazzled mess because you are in perpetual reaction mode? Have you not really even deeply pondered God's will for your life but just done what you were told by other people?

Are you the sort of person who is defiant, independent, and self-reliant? Or, do you regularly (e.g., at least one hour a week and one day a month) get silence and solitude with God to work on your life before you work in it?

Four Ways to Change Your Life

1. Heart change – conviction from God and repentance from you
2. Study – research and fact-finding for how to change your life, which includes reading the Bible and other books, speaking with people you know who have wisdom, etc.
3. Plan – ongoing, detailed, and prayerful life organization
4. Action – working your plan and making changes as life requires:

Moleskine – always keep a journal like this nearby to jot notes, thoughts, and convictions in

Journaling – use your laptop to gather the scattered ideas in your Moleskine and prayerfully and carefully add to and consider them

Calendar – take action items from your silence and solitude day and put them on the calendar, as without being officially planned, nothing ever gets done to completion

Most people are good at one or two of these steps. Some have a heart change and do their homework but do not make a plan and take action to change their life. Others have plans and action but are religiously just doing duties because they have not experienced heart change from God. Others move from heart change to action without research and a plan; they mean well but make their life (e.g., health, finances, relationships) worse.

Take some time and be honest with yourself. List each of these steps in order from the one you are strongest at to the one you are weakest at.

Where is your life getting stuck and what can you do to grow where you are weak? Who do you need to talk to and learn from? What do you need to repent of?

Understanding Silence and Solitude

Silence and solitude is fasting from people and noise for a prescribed time to connect with God and replenish the soul. The opposite of solitude is isolation, where someone is burned out and goes into survival mode by disappearing. Solitude is godly, isolation is deadly, and if we don't enjoy the former we'll wind up pursuing the latter.

Despite the constant pressures upon his time from family, friends, and fans, Jesus' own life was marked by ongoing times of solitude. The following verses speak of how Jesus often practiced the spiritual discipline of solitude:

- "And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone." (Matt. 14:23)
- "And he said to them, 'Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." (Mark 6:31)
- "And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place." (Luke 4:42)
- "But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray." (Luke 5:16)

Furthermore, as we study Scripture we see that Jesus used solitude for a multitude of purposes.

Following his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in solitude preparing for his public ministry (Matt. 4:1–11).

After his cousin, John the Baptizer, was beheaded, Jesus spent time alone to mourn (Matt. 14:12–13).

Jesus also used times of solitude as occasions for intense and focused prayer (Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35;

Luke 5:16). Jesus specifically used solitude as an opportunity to pray and seek the Father's will before

choosing the twelve disciples (Luke 6:12). In addition, Jesus used solitude to rest after a hard day of

work (Mark 6:31). Finally, knowing he was soon to be crucified, Jesus spent time alone in the Garden of

Gethsemane, coming to grips with the painful obedience that was required of him (Mark 26:36–46).

Other biblical figures also used solitude for a litany of purposes. Moses spent time alone on the

mountain with God in order to receive a word from God, namely the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19–

20). Isaiah was both saved and sustained by God through his times of solitude with the Lord (Isa. 30:15).

In Psalm 62:1–2, 5 David says that in solitude God calmed his fears and encouraged his soul. Paul as well

spent some three years in varying degrees of solitude being prepared by the Lord for ministry, according

to Galatians 1:17–19.

Clearly, time alone with God serves innumerable good purposes in our lives. Therefore, to help you consider how to enjoy purposeful times of solitude, I would encourage the following. One, you may need to simply schedule a day of solitude to ensure that this is a regular part of your spiritual life. I do this at least one day a month and find it to be the most important and refreshing part of my life; it enables me to function in the other areas of my life because it helps me remain continually connected to Jesus. Two, find a place where you like to go. This may mean that you spend a day in God's creation hiking or simply resting. Three, if you are a parent, this may mean that you have to get up early or stay up late to get some time to yourself at home.

There are many things you can do during your periods of solitude, including:

1. Nothing
2. Meditate on a short section of Scripture
3. Rest
4. Read long sections of Scripture
5. Pray, including a prayer-walk/hike/bike
6. Read a good book
7. Journal

Silence and Solitude Stealers

Despite the Bible's exhortation and Jesus' example to enjoy times of silence and solitude, few Christians regularly enjoy these gifts from God. This is because there are some real enemies at work that need to be combated for silence and solitude to be enjoyed. The following are some of the more common silence and solitude stealers that have to be dealt with as an act of repentance:

1. **Those people** – pushy, needy, demanding, high-drama, inconsiderate people steal your life, joy, health, and time—often in the name of ministry, when it's really people-pleasing idolatry that allows them to get away with it.
2. **Technology** – you cannot be a maturing Christian following the example of Jesus Christ if you are always surfing the Internet, dinking around on your cell phone, reading emails, texting, tweeting, rocking out, and watching TV. You have to turn them off to tune in to God. Yes, I have all of the latest technology, and I turn it off so my soul can recharge. Do you really think Jesus would have been checking his buddy's friend request in the Garden of Gethsemane if he had an iPhone?
3. **Lack of planning** – in *Leading On Empty*, Wayne Cordeiro shows that in Genesis 1 when the Bible describes days, it says there was first evening then morning. So, biblically, the day begins at night with rest, Sabbath, and silence. That then prepares us for work and conversation. This is like Jesus, who spent time alone before beginning his public ministry.
4. **Trading busyness for fruitfulness** – some people say they are too busy to worship, pray, Sabbath, journal, and so forth, but they have tragically traded being busy for being godly, obedient, and wise fruitful stewards. Is your busyness truly fruitful or would some plans to organize your world, home, diet, budget, schedule, and life be helpful?
5. **Lack of appreciation** – the Bible has a great deal to say about the benefits of purposeful silence, including:
 - hearing from God (1 Kings 19:11–13)
 - waiting patiently for the Lord to act (Lam. 3:25–28)
 - worshiping God (Hab. 2:20)
 - knowing God better (Ps. 46:10)
 - praying effectively (Luke 5:16)

My prayer is that those reading this who are guilty of people and noise addiction would experience the regular gifts of silence and solitude because that is often where God is waiting for us. There was silence before God spoke the world into existence, and silence for forty days before Jesus began his public ministry. May you too enjoy silence and solitude before you attempt to live your life with, for, like, and to God.

Journaling

The following is a copy of the template I created for myself to organize my days of silence and solitude for the purpose of journaling. I offer it knowing that you can and should change it to fit your life. This is not Scripture, it's not perfect, and I don't claim it is. Rather, it is a simple tool for you to adapt as you need. For me, I keep notes in my Moleskine throughout the week, and sit down to answer these questions on my laptop in a Word document. This keeps it simple for me and allows me to see God's work in my life over time.

Ideally, every Christian would do a modified version of this plan every week as an act of worship, taking around an hour to answer a few of the questions that are most pressing for them. In addition, it is wise to take at least one full day a month in silence and solitude to answer all the questions without being rushed, leaving time to open your Bible, pray, repent, worship, and ponder.

Silence and Solitude Journaling Template

“. . . the report about him [Jesus] went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.” — Luke 5:15–16

Date:

Modified or Full Plan:

Note: Here I am making note if it's one hour or one day for silence and solitude.

Place and Conditions:

Note: I am someone for whom space deeply matters. On a nice day I sit outside by a river or at the beach in a beautiful spot. I don't like coffee shops (too noisy and crowded) or the office (too much distraction). I like to be up high with a view, crave fresh air, love the sun, and cannot relax where it's loud, busy, ugly, stinky, disorganized, poorly designed, uncomfortable, or too hot or cold, and yes, I am picky. So, I note where I was and that helps me keep a record of nice spots for silence and solitude days. I borrow friends' vacation homes, have spots I like outside of town in the mountains, and so forth.

Part 1 – Recent Evidences of God’s Grace

“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.” — 2 Thess. 2:16–17

Note: To have good words and works, we need hope and comfort by seeing and savoring evidences of God’s grace. I start with this topic to get me into a mode of worship. I can be quite a gloomy and moody person, so this gets me going in the right direction for my time with God. I often take an hour on this topic alone and make a long list, thanking God and praying as I go.

Part 2 – Deep Questions

“The purpose in a man’s mind is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.” — Prov. 20:5 (RSV)

Note: These are my questions and you can make your own or change mine. I don’t include Bible reading and study because they are like breathing to me, but you may want to add them. In question four I’m talking about my wife, Grace. I list each of my kids in question five because with a big family it’s too easy to treat the kids as a herd rather than knowing and pastoring each one. I put my work last, figuring that if the rest of my life is in order, work will go well. I rate every question on a scale so that I can be honest about how I’m doing and track progress over time. The prayer points are things I pray about as I’m journaling and things to put on my prayer list that week. The action items go on my calendar. Lastly, I share a lot of this with my wife, kids, friends, and others, and a lot of my blogs and ministry training are simply sharing what comes out of my journaling on days of silence and solitude.

1. How accurate is my view of God lately?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

2. How are my joy in the Holy Spirit and corresponding hope?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

3. What temptations and sins are most ensnaring?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

4. How is my connection with my wife?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

5. How is my connection with each of my children?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

6. How is my health (e.g., weight, diet, exercise)?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

7. How is my sleep (e.g., bed time, quality of sleep, length of sleep)?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

8. How is my energy level?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

9. How is my dominion over my technology (e.g., cell phone, laptop, email, text)?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

10. How is the stewardship of my wealth (e.g., finances, possessions, property, investments)?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

11. How is my social life with friends and extended family?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

12. Who or what is filling my tank lately?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

13. Who or what is draining my tank lately?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

14. Who has sinned against me and how am I responding?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

15. Who do I need to confide in and where should I seek wisdom?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

16. Are there any warning signs that I am burning out?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

17. Am I successfully getting out of the river onto the bank enough through silence, solitude, study, and Sabbath?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

18. What do I need to stop doing, do less of, or hand off to someone else?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

19. How are my self-deception and truth suppression?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

20. How is my writing (e.g., books, blogs, papers)?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items

21. How is my preaching (preparation and results, in and out of Mars Hill)?

- Scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high)
- Prayer Points
- Action Items