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Don't Just Do Something ... Sit There!

The Discipline of Silence

by Bob Chisholm

Only in the sacredness of inward silence does the soul truly meet the secret, hiding God. The strength of resolve, which afterwards shapes life and mixes itself with action, is the fruit of those sacred, solitary moments.

Frederick William Robertson¹
(1816-1853)

*They found rich, good pasture, and the land was spacious, peaceful and **quiet**.* -1 Chronicles 4:40

But you will have a son who will be a man of peace and rest, and I will give him rest from all his enemies on every side. His name will be Solomon, *and I will grant Israel peace and **quiet** during his reign.* -1 Chronicles 22:9

*I have no peace, no **quietness**; I have no rest, but only turmoil.* -Job 3:26

*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside **quiet** waters,* -Psalms 23:2

Be Still, and know that I am God; -Psalms 46:10

But I have stilled and **quieted** my soul;
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.
-Psalms 131:2

Better a dry crust with peace and **quiet** than a house full of feasting, with strife.
-Proverbs 17:1

The **quiet words** of the wise are more to be heeded *than the shouts of a ruler of fools.* -Ecclesiastes 9:17

The fruit of righteousness will be peace; *the effect of righteousness will be **quietness** and confidence forever.* -Isaiah 32:17

*It is good to **wait quietly** for the salvation of the LORD.* -Lamentations 3:26

The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take delight in you, he will quiet you with his love *he will rejoice over you with singing.*
-Zephaniah 3:17

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a **solitary place**.

Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. -Matthew 14:13

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. -Mark 1:35

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.*" -Mark 6:31

So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. -Mark 6:32

At daybreak Jesus went out to **a solitary place**. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was *they tried to keep him from leaving them.* -Luke 4:42

Make it your ambition to lead a **quiet life**, to mind your own business *and to work with your hands just as we told you.* -1 Thessalonians 4:11

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, *the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.* -1 Peter 3:3-4

Restless Hearts

Silence and solitude are praised in scripture. They are desired by godly people, and they are commanded by God. In the above texts, choice land is described as "*quiet and peaceful.*" A successful ruler is one who brings "*peace and quiet*" to the nation. The trusted shepherd takes us to "*quiet waters.*" Powerful and effective words are "*quiet words.*" The natural companion of confidence is "*quietness.*" When God comes to our aid, he brings "*quiet*" to our souls. The godly life that Paul recommended was the "*quiet life.*" The beauty that will endure for a lifetime is a "*quiet spirit.*"

But let's face it, silence and solitude can be very intimidating. Having no agenda can feel extremely uncomfortable, and waiting has developed a bad reputation. We don't like to wait in line. We don't like to sit in waiting rooms. And, when we conclude that waiting has no value we usually choose its alternative. Someone asks, "What have you been doing lately?" We answer, "Trying to keep busy," as if busyness is the measurement of our worth. Sara Park McLaughlin, records the story of an individual struggling with his busy life,

[A] prominent salesman complained of malaise, depression, and burnout. He wanted to restore a spiritual quality to his life, but he did not know how. The minister listed thoughtfully as he talked. Then he responded, "The first thing you need to do is learn to relax. How long has it been since you took your family on a vacation?" The man paused a few minutes, then said, "I honestly cannot remember the last time we all went on vacation together." "Then I want you to take your family on a long trip. Go to California; stop on the way at the Grand Canyon. Just take your whole two-week vacation now, and call me when you get back." Eight days later, the phone rang at the church. The minister was surprised to hear the man's voice. The minister asked, "Where are you calling from?" "You will never believe it, but we are back home," the man replied enthusiastically. "We took a long trip like you suggested and saw everything that we planned to see. Best of all, we did it in only eight days. So we made it home ahead of schedule!"²

A teacher at a Christian high school introduced silence into his classroom.³ For ten minutes each day the students were instructed to be relaxed, awake, open, aware, but silent. One boy commented, "It is the only time in my day when I'm not expected to achieve something." One parent said, "I'm not paying all that tuition for my child to sit there and do nothing." Ten minutes of silence. So special to one. So threatening to another. Why the difference?

Fat with Words

For most people silence creates an uncomfortable, nervous feeling. It does not feel rich and full, but barren and hollow. It looks like a huge empty hole swallowing up both time and energy. We become uneasy and usually preoccupied with one thought, "*When will this be over?*" And because of our restlessness, we try to fill this uncomfortable hole in our lives with words.

In his book, *The Way of the Heart*, Henri Nouwen describes the temptation and power of words:

Recently I was driving through Los Angeles, and suddenly I had the strange sensation of driving through a huge dictionary. Wherever I looked there were words trying to take my eyes from the road. They

said, "Use me, take me, buy me, drink me, smell me, touch me, kiss me, sleep with me." In such a world who can maintain respect for words?⁴

Each day we are bombarded and over-loaded with words. They stack up and run together. Eventually, we reach a saturation point where words lose their power and we lose our confidence in words. Teachers lecture, ministers preach, politicians issue statements, and business executives make speeches. Each day, every week, all year our lives are filled to the brim with words. And then, when God speaks, we have no appetite for words. We have no room. We are crowded with activity, crammed with too much conversation, fat with too many words. As T.S. Eliot analyzed, "Where shall the world be found, where shall the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence."⁵

Doing or Being

Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who **does** the will of my father, who is in heaven. -Matthew 7:21

*For whoever **does** the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, sister, and mother.* -Matthew 12:50

*Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you **do** them.* -John 13:17

*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves, **do** what it says.* -James 1:22

These are a few of the texts underlining the value and importance of acting and doing. Add to these quotations James 2:14-26 which describes the harmony of "faith" and "deeds." Clearly, faith is something we do. Perhaps this is why in the more than one occurrences in the gospel of John, "faith" never occurs as a noun. It is always a verb. Faith is something we do.

But there is another kind of doing at work in our world. It has a good reputation, but not a good impact on our lives. This kind of doing is not praised or commanded in scripture, but it is praised in our fast-paced culture. Sometimes we call it "productivity" or we say "time is money." Yet even the culture that promotes this kind of doing is beginning to see the effects of workaholic and burnout. Hyper-tension, fatigue, poor judgment: these are some of the effects of a kind of doing that is "doing us in." Marcia Hornok has rewritten the Twenty-Third Psalm in the style of our stressed-out, fast-paced culture.⁶

The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest.
It makes me lie down only when exhausted.
It leads me to deep depression.
It hounds my soul.
It leads me in circles of frenzy for activity's sake.
Even though I run frantically from task to task,
I will never get it all done.
For my "ideal" is with me.
Deadlines and my need for approval, they drive me.
They demand performance from me, beyond the limits of my schedule.
They anoint my head with migraines.
My in-basket over flows.
Surely fatigue and time pressure shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the bonds of frustration forever.

It is hard to miss the frantic, compulsive, and agitated life produced by this kind of doing. As Charles Swindoll puts it:

In place of a quiet responsive spirit, we offer him an inner washing machine, churning with anxiety, clogged with too much activity and spilling over with resentment and impatience.⁷

This kind of doing pushes everything else out of the way as it elbows its way to the front. It assumes an undeserved position of influence and begins to crowd out a major biblical theme.

*We **wait** and hope for the Lord, He is our help and our shield.* -Psalm 32:20

Be still for the Lord and **wait** patiently for Him.
-Psalm 37:7

*I **waited** patiently for the Lord, He turned to me and heard my cry.* -Psalm 40:1

*Within your temple, O God, we **meditate** on your unfailing love.* -Psalm 48:9

*I will **meditate** on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.* -Psalm 77:12

I **wait** for the Lord, my soul **waits**, and in His word I put my hope.
*My soul **waits** for the Lord more than watchmen **wait** for the morning.* -Psalm 130:5, 6

Wait. Listen. Be still. Meditate. Sit. Be quiet.

In the same way that worldly doing has nothing in common with godly doing, the waiting, sitting, and listening described in these texts has everything in common with godly doing. In fact, it is the waiting that prepares us for biblical action. It is the quiet reflection that equips us for godly doing.

Sounds of Silence

We all grew up hearing the proverbial statement, “*Don’t just sit there, do something.*” I choose to think that this is referring to a good kind of doing. But since our doing is often not good, consider a new arrangement of this old phrase, “*Don’t just do something . . . sit there.*” You see, sitting is becoming a dying art. People feel like they have to be doing something. If they are not working, they are jogging, or shopping, or playing or they are watching television. But sitting in front of the television isn’t sitting. It is watching.

But there was a time when people practiced sitting. You would find them out on the front porch, on a bench in front of the store, or during the colder months, in chairs around a pot-bellied stove. There were sitting benches on the Court House lawn. There were park benches along the sidewalks. Houses even had sitting rooms. Richard Exley describes one of his favorite places to sit:

Another private place was my Grandma Miller’s house. Granddad died when I was nine. After that, I began spending four and five nights a week with her. She couldn’t read or write and didn’t trust electricity. It was like stepping back into another age. Many a night we sat in comfortable silence, each entertained by our own thoughts, wrapped in the soft glow of a kerosene lamp. Sometimes we talked, but it wasn’t necessary. Silence was a friend we both knew well and welcomed.⁸

Sitting. Thinking. Quietly talking. It might look like nothing is happening. But recharging a battery doesn’t look exciting. And how dim our lights would be without the time our battery sits . . . and waits. Sitting restores the soul, and so, don’t just do something, sit there.

Stilling the Noise

Does God force his way into our hearts? Does he storm our lives and take over our inner life by overpowering us? No, he comes in when we stop. When we become still, when we issue the invitation, he comes in. Often he enters very slowly. This is true

of any significant truth or habit. Slowly, surely, permanently: they all come in carefully. But first we must stop. “*Be still, and know that I am God*” (Psalm 46:10). The *Jerusalem Bible* translates “*Pause awhile.*” It captures more correctly the sense of the word. Stop moving. Stop talking. Take a deep breath. Relax.

There is an old proverb to the effect that “*the man who opens his mouth, closes his eyes!*” *The purpose of silence and solitude is to see and hear.*⁹

When we stop and close our mouths, we begin to see and hear noise for what it really is. There are many kinds of noise in our world. There is the external noise of telephones and car horns. There is the background noise of the radio and television. Add to these the deadline noise we hear as we rush through our hectic schedules.

There is another kind of inner noise we hear, which may create more pain than worldly distractions. We hear Jesus say, “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.”¹⁰

Obedying Jesus does not mean we completely shut out the noise of the world with the doubts, unresolved fears, and bad memories it brings. On the contrary, it is when we are alone, away from the external and the background noise, that we often hear the inner noise more clearly. Even though we may have a great desire for silence, often when we are without people with whom to talk, books to read, television to watch, or phone calls to make, an inner chaos opens up inside. Wayne Oates calls this our “*noisy heart.*”¹¹ It is our noisy heart that pushes us to get busy again—to turn on the outer distraction in order to mask an inner chaos. The discipline of silence can be very painful. This is why it is important. First we listen to our own heart, made clear to us by silence. Then we bring our chaotic heart to God. Then, the way begins to clear for God to bring his heart to us. It is at these times, according to Frederick Faber, that we hear the “whisperings of God,”

Whenever the sounds of the world die out in the soul, or sink low, then we hear these whisperings of God. He is always whispering to us, only we do not always hear, because of the noise, hurry and distraction which life causes as it rushes on.¹²

God’s voice can best be heard when we are silent. As Francois Fenelon wrote, “it is a gently delicate voice, only heard by those who no longer hear anything else.”¹³

Religious Noise

Most will agree, at least philosophically, on the value of silence and danger in noise. But what kind of noise do we have in mind? It is loud, irrational noise to be sure. It is evil, ungodly noise for certain. But what about religious noise?

*To approach God with only an incessant stream of words is a filibuster, not prayer. On the other hand, listening prayer . . . helps us learn how to wait.*¹⁴

What happens when we exchange secular, cultural noise for religious noise? It may be clean, with no subliminal messages or unclear thoughts, but still, we have noise! Instead of being busy with people, we are busy with God. And still, there is no room for quiet, for listening, for waiting, for reflection. God's attitude is clear enough:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the **noise** of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.¹⁵

Even religious activity can become noise that cancels the power of silence. Do we believe that God can be at work while we are at rest? “. . . when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.” (Psalm 4:4).

Andy T. Ritchie Jr. was a man of few, but powerful words. He offered words slowly, punctuated with long periods of silence. As one of my teachers, his words were always clear, and I never grew impatient with the silent breaks in his sentences. Instead, I felt restful and thoughtful. In their home worship, the Ritchie family would sing a song about silence. It reminded them that God works in silence and could be found there.

In silence comes all loveliness,
The dawn is ever still,
No noise accompanies the dew
That glistens on the hill.

The sunrise comes up quietly,
the moon is never heard,
And love that animates the eyes
Surpasses any word.

And prayer is best in solitude,
It seems so very odd,
That long before I did not know,

*In silence I'd find God.*¹⁶

Public / Private

Jesus realized that life must be in balance, that public times must be balanced by private times. He knew, as manifest in the following reading from Mark 1:29-39, that the market-place person must learn to be a quiet-place person as well.

*As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. 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. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.*¹⁷

Notice the pattern in Jesus' life.¹⁸ In stage one, he receives love and power from God. In stage two, he shares that love and power with people. In stage three, he returns to replenish with God. This was his rhythm: public, then private; active, then quiet; words, then silence; crowds, then solitude. Notice that the descriptions of his quiet time and his private moments are not of sleep. His was an alert aloneness — an awake solitude.

*Be Still, My Soul*¹⁹

Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide.
In every change He faithfully will remain.
Be still my soul; Thy best, thy heavenly friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul; Thy God doeth undertake
To guide the future as he has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last,
Be still, my soul; the ways and winds still know
His voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.

Be still, my soul. The hours hastening on
 when we shall be forever with the Lord;
 When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone;
 Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
 Be still, my soul; When change and tears are
 passed,
all safe and blest, we shall meet at last.

In stillness we relinquish control. In silence we become more aware of God's presence and the hope, confidence, joy, and safety he offers. In the whirlwind of noise and activity we only see our problems. Masking them with more noise simply compounds the difficulties. Retreating in sleep postpones them till the next day. But being still and being silent creates a place in our hearts for God to work. "*Silence is the home of the word.*"²⁰ It gives strength and fullness to the work of God's words in our lives. But, we must stop . . . we must be silent.

Silence Test²¹

1. What place and time are the quietest for you to experience in your regular day's routine?
2. Who in your life creates the most uproar, confusion, and stress? What have you done to change this? Do you prefer the uproar to silence?
3. What choices do you have to accomplish your day's work in a quieter, more strain-free way?
4. List any pockets of silence that exist in your work situation.
5. What kinds of noise fill your days, and what have you done to lower the noise level for yourself and for others?
6. Have you made any progress in breaking your addiction to television, telephone, radio, and stereo?
7. Have you caught yourself becoming fatigued, losing perspective, exercising poor judgment, and becoming confused? Did you immediately create some time of silence for yourself?
8. What initiative have you taken to create specific times, places, and rituals for silence and solitude?
9. Are you aware of the silent presence of God in any personal way at all?