
Silence & Solitude

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is doubtless something a little ironic about doing a radio program on the spiritual discipline of silence. We could just put on 30 minutes of dead air and static for you to listen to, but we figured you would change the channel pretty quickly if we did. So, in this episode of Groundwork, and as part of our series on spiritual disciplines, we will do the somewhat paradoxical thing of talking about the intricately connected disciplines of silence and solitude. Both disciplines have a long history in the Christian tradition; going back for sure all the way to Jesus, but with lots of Old Testament lessons on this matter as well. So, today as we talk about silence, we invite you to stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are continuing, Dave, thinking about spiritual disciplines, and the series that we are in the midst of, and today we come to, as we just said, two closely related disciplines. You can actually separate these two out and talk about them separately, but we are just going to combine silence and solitude. We already know that it is kind of funny to have to talk about silence...

DAVE BAST

Wait a minute, Scott; wait, wait, sh. (3 seconds of silence) Okay, that is enough silence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is about as much silence as most people can take.

DAVE BAST

Dead air; the worst thing you can do in radio.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Apparently more and more in modern life it is the worst thing people can imagine anywhere because all you have to do is look around you in life and you see people are... maybe when they sleep they have silence, although I suppose some people sleep with the TV on, but it is...

DAVE BAST

Or a white noise machine.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is pretty rare to see people reveling in silence today when they are out and about.

DAVE BAST

Well, I like to walk, and one of the things that always strikes me is almost everybody who passes you, whether walking or jogging or whatever, has earbuds in; and so they are listening to music or to talk or sometimes to the radio. The guy that I love to walk with – we have often commented on this – just listen to

what is going on around you. It will be quiet most of the time. You will hear a bird maybe once in a while; you will hear the sounds of the wind; but no, we have an artificial audio environment now that surrounds us everywhere, even when we are alone.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the same thing on airplanes, right? Most people have their laptops or iPads out watching movies often, earbuds in their ears.

DAVE BAST

The first thing they do is hand you a set of earphones on a long flight, on an international flight.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Some of our listeners are probably just old enough to remember – actually, I must be getting older, because recently on Facebook somebody had a picture of a Sony Walkman and said, “Click here if you can remember this.” Remember this? It seems like yesterday; but that actually went back to the 1970s or so...

DAVE BAST

That is the thing that started it all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes, the Walkman.

DAVE BAST

The portable... listen to your cassette tapes. Who has them anymore?

SCOTT HOEZEE

People used to walk in silence, and like you said, listen to the birds, make conversation with a friend, hear the wind; but now, the Walkman said: No, you cannot just walk; you have to walk and listen to something; and now with digital technology and iPods and all that, it has only exploded more.

DAVE BAST

Well, and I think what is worse perhaps is not what we do to ourselves, because we can control that. You can always unplug or take the earbuds out; but the public spaces of our society are filled with noise, and they are filled with... you cannot go into a store without a sound track playing. It is inescapable. I noticed this yesterday. I stopped in to our local grocery store, which is on one end of a mall, and we exited through the mall, and it was just this...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Non-stop.

DAVE BAST

Constant; oh, man! Not the kind of music I would choose.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I walk in the mall early in the morning before most things are open, although some employees are in their stores. So, what you often have in the morning – it is quite quiet in the mall – but already then at 7:00 in the morning the muzak is playing, and then as you walk by individual stores, they all have their individual music, and so you have... sometimes you can hear three different pieces of music simultaneously – it is quite disorienting – but the point is, we fill the world with noise; even sometimes public spaces outdoors, pedestrian malls, have speakers built into trash cans now, that fill even the outdoor spaces with noise. Also, now this might be a little sensitive for some people, but I think we also need to notice that increasingly in worship services it is the same thing.

DAVE BAST

I think our worship services at many of our churches have gotten way too noisy. Recorded music is a big culprit. Now, in many churches there are videos that play. I still remember as a child the idea was the Lord is in His holy Temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him, as Habakkuk says. You come to worship and you are quiet and you prepare your mind and your heart for what is going to happen. Now there is just this constant... something is always going on, even during prayer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am often struck that even before the formal piano or organ or praise band prelude, there is piped in music or there are these countdown videos now that count down to the beginning of the service. It all gets in the way of our having any chance for the contemplation and the focus that comes through silence. If we need an example of what that looks like, we need look no further than our Lord Jesus Himself; before whom we are coming in worship. We will just read three brief passages that are so representative; how often don't we read something like this from Mark 1:35-39:

³⁵Very 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. ³⁶Simon and His companions went to look for Him, ³⁷and when they found Him, they exclaimed, "Everyone is looking for You." ³⁸Jesus replied, "Let's go somewhere else to the nearby villages so I can preach also there. That is why I have come." ³⁹So He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

DAVE BAST

Here is another one, also from Mark, from Mark 6:30: ³⁰The apostles returned to Jesus (this is after He had sent them out on a similar mission to preach and to heal, to drive out demons) and told Him all that they had done and taught, ³¹and 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one more from Luke 5:15, 16: ¹⁵But now, even more, the report about Jesus went abroad and great crowds gathered to hear Him and to be healed of their infirmities. ¹⁶But He would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

DAVE BAST

So, it seems that the busier Jesus got – and He also tried to teach His disciples this same principle – the busier you get, the more you need to withdraw for periods of silence and solitude.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And these were periods of prayer, which is its own discipline that we have looked at in another program, and the silence no doubt enabled the prayer, but there were clearly times for Jesus where it was just the silence too without the prayer. Maybe the silence led to the prayer; but the point being, Jesus...

DAVE BAST

The silence of listening, which is also part of prayer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and Jesus – like you said, Dave, the busier He got, the more He seemed to need that; and the disciples were often going the other way: Hey, hey, things are happening, and crowds are gathering; what are you doing up here sitting by yourself in silence? Let's get to the people. And Jesus would say: Nah. Let's go do something else, and then when we are done with that we have to get back to some silent time with God.

DAVE BAST

There is a lot more we want to say about this, and we will do that when we return.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and we have just seen a few sample passages from the Gospels, in which Jesus is withdrawing, or encouraging His disciples to withdraw, for these periodic times of silence and listening and waiting on the Lord; and He seemed to think that was a crucial part of the life of faith, including the busyness of service, of ministry.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it seems like the silence and the solitude, and therefore the fellowship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit Jesus had during those periods of... it was not just purposeless down time. He was not taking a nap. He was fully alert, but in communion with God, and that is what energized Him to go back to do more. You get the feeling with Jesus if you took away one, the other would not happen either.

DAVE BAST

An interesting word choice you just used: Energize. I was thinking of the phrase: Recharging your batteries. We all recognize the need for that, but we tend not to do it, and I wonder what the reasons are for that? I was thinking as we were talking about the noise in our modern lives; even in contemporary churches so often the noise that we fill every dead space with – every quiet space – why do we feel compelled to do that? I wonder if part of the reason is that we do not really want to meet with God or we are not comfortable being with ourselves, even. We want to distract ourselves; we want to prevent ourselves from having to think seriously about whom we are and what we are and where we stand before the Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I do know some people who – I have observed them for years, and they seem afraid of silence; they seem afraid of what might occur to them, or maybe also what God might say to them if they actually had times when there was no input coming in externally by way of noise and sound or music, and there may be something to that. If we give God a chance to say something, who knows what He will say. So, we do not mean to shut God out, but practically speaking, we do; and that was something Jesus always resisted. He needed to have that fellowship with His Father or He could not do His ministry.

DAVE BAST

This goes even back beyond Jesus and before Jesus; and we should talk a little bit about the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament; the wisdom literature in books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes that talk about not just the external noise that we tend to fill our lives with, but the way we can chatter and fill in the spaces ourselves, often with empty words or meaningless speech.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. Richard Foster, again quoting him all throughout this series from *Celebration of Discipline*, he mentions a key theme all through Proverbs and a key theme all through Ecclesiastes – as you said, the wisdom books – is that sometimes the best thing to do is to say nothing. He mentions in Ecclesiastes 5:1 – obviously there is the famous line in Ecclesiastes that there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak, but in Ecclesiastes 5:1, we are told something that is called the sacrifice of fools, and what the sacrifice of fools is, is the folly to think you always have to say something. You never shut up. You are never quiet. You never listen. You figure every space has to be filled with something you have to say. Ecclesiastes says: That is folly; that is the sacrifice of fools; and boy, we have a lot of that in society and in the media today, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you just made me think of the line: It is better to keep your mouth shut and have people think you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.

We talk about that – there is an archetype in our culture: The strong, silent type. There is a strength and a wisdom in avoiding empty chatter or just always having to fill the air with words. You are so uncomfortable allowing there to be a silence that you rush to speak too soon. But it is also a silence for listening and speaking with God, and waiting for His response. That brings to mind another Old Testament passage we want to look at. One of the most beautiful stories, really, in the book of Kings, certainly, maybe the whole Old Testament; but it has to do with Elijah, and for those who are familiar with the Bible, they will remember the story of how Elijah lived and worked in the time of Ahab and Jezebel, a very wicked period in Israel’s history – the northern kingdom – and Elijah had this great confrontation on Mount Carmel with all the prophets of Baal, and God acted in a marvelous and tremendous, miraculous way; vindicated Elijah; and afterwards, Elijah kind of went into a funk. He was depressed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, Jezebel threatened his life, and it scared him so badly...

DAVE BAST

He had a reason.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But he took off. He was very depressed. He takes off; he ends up at Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, in I Kings 19, and he hides out in a cave there; and God is trying to get his attention. So, let’s listen to these verses. God comes to him – he is wanting to die – he said to God a couple of times: Look, I am done. I just do not want to work for You anymore; I am so depressed; just kill me. So, God says, look,
¹¹“Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord passed by and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake came, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. ¹²After the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, the sound of a low whisper. ¹³And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave, and behold, there came a voice to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

What I love about that passage is...

DAVE BAST

The still small voice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The still small voice. We miss this sometimes when we read this. Elijah is in the cave, which is both physically and symbolically a sign of his depression. God says, “Go stand out front.” He does not do it. He stays right in the cave. Fire, earthquake, wind – none of it gets his attention. He is so depressed it does not... but then, he hears a whisper. He hears the silence of God, almost, and then he gets up and goes out. The silence of God got his attention in a way nothing else could, and that is when God said, “I am still with you. You are not alone.” If Elijah had not had the silence, and if God had not entered the silence, Elijah never would have heard that encouraging word.

DAVE BAST

Makes me think of a wonderful verse from Psalms, Psalm 62:1: For God alone my soul waits in silence. And that is really what we want to do. That is why we are urging this spiritual discipline; for God alone my soul waits in silence; so that we can meet Him and so that we can hear from Him. There are some practical things we can do as well, and we want to talk about that when we come back.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork and our ongoing series on spiritual disciplines today. The spiritual disciplines, the yoked – they go right together – of silence and

solitude. We were just saying, Dave, the Old Testament tradition, the wisdom tradition, is constantly telling us: Do not talk so much. Do not feel like you have to fill every silent gap in life with your voice. We said at the beginning, silence would not play well on the radio. We could not just do a 30-minute program of silence. Silence does not play very well on TV either. Nobody wants to watch somebody think. Nobody wants to watch somebody be thoughtful with their mouth shut. No, no, no; you have to fire off responses right away; fill every gap...

DAVE BAST

Sound bytes; sound bytes, we call them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And we can never chew enough of them. We fill our plates full with sound bytes; everywhere and everything. The ancient wisdom of the Bible – of the Old Testament, and of Jesus, is that silence furthers our relationship with God. In fact, it is impossible to speak with God, to pray properly, apart from exercising the discipline of silence and solitude. That is what furthers our trust in God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We could say – and listeners right now might be thinking to themselves – Well, yes; God is almighty. If He wants to get through to you, if He wants to tell you something, He will get through to you. He does not need you to be quiet, does He? Well, yes, that is true, but you know what? So often in scripture we see how God prefers to operate, and apparently God prefers to speak to us when we are silent. It worked for Jesus, so who are we to try to improve on Jesus? If the Son of God in flesh needed periods of silence to hear from His Father...

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who are we? We sure do, too, then.

DAVE BAST

I think what will happen is, God will get through to you. He will get your attention, just as He did with Elijah. He got Elijah's attention with the earthquake and the wind and the fire – whoa – but He spoke in the still small voice, and in the same way – here is the obligatory C. S. Lewis quote, as we say; we love quoting C. S. Lewis: God whispers in our pleasures, but He shouts in our pain. So, yes; God will maybe get our attention when some great pain or problem comes into our lives, but He is going to speak to us as we are quiet and as we meditate on that. What is He saying? What does He mean? What is He trying to tell me? That will happen only when we are quiet.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is a noisy, busy world; and so, what are some things? We have four suggestions here; again, a hat tip to Richard Foster and *Celebration of the Disciplines*, because we got a few ideas from Richard Foster's book. So, where can we build in a little more silence in our lives? Four ideas as we close the program – and these are things I have tried to do, and maybe you have, too, Dave – and things, as I have been reminded of them, even preparing for this series, of which I have already tried to do more.

The first idea is to take advantage of the little solitudes of everyday life. There are times in our lives when we can be quiet. Maybe after the alarm goes off, instead of just getting right out of bed and running to the next thing, lie in bed for a few minutes; just be quiet and stretch a little bit; just be quiet. Focus on how you want God to go with you that whole day; or you are in bumper-to-bumper traffic; or sometimes I have to drive for three or four hours in one direction; I almost never – I am on the radio, and we like Groundwork – but I

almost never have the radio on when I am driving by myself. I will go for three or four hours with the radio off the whole time. I like what occurs to me during that time; I like reveling in the presence of God. So there are, even in traffic jams, which can otherwise raise your blood pressure, you can just relax and be with God. Turn the radio off. There are little solitudes every day we can nurture.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so what we are saying, first of all, is unplug once in a while.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Or switch off the dial and just allow yourself to have those times of solitude and silence. A second thing, I think – a wonderful, practical suggestion – is that you find a quiet place in your home, or make a quiet place in your home – have a favorite chair. We used to, in the evangelical world, talk about your daily “quiet time.” Personal devotions; the practice, the discipline, which spills over into both prayer and meditating on scripture, because that is what you do, but it also involves waiting on the Lord and spending some time in quiet. So, even if you do not have a whole room that you can devote to this, you can have a favorite nook or a chair or a place where you regularly go to be still and wait for the Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there may even be places at your place of work. It is not always practical, I know; and people have different types of jobs, which may or may not allow them to break away; but there may be places in our place of employment where you could go. Richard Foster even mentioned that a lot of people design new homes and they always make sure to have a living room for fellowship and they have a den and a rec room with all the latest, state-of-the-art video equipment and surround sound stereo; if you are going to build a new home, why not have an inner prayer closet? Build it by design. This is a place where I can go in silence, close the door, light a candle, read scripture, just be silent. Why not be even that intentional about it? Very few people are, but why not?

DAVE BAST

We sometimes talk today about putting a man cave in your basement with a big TV and all that. Why not have a God cave like Elijah had, where you can go.

Here is a third idea, and that is that you take some time during each day and perhaps some days during each month when you are intentionally quiet. Maybe you go about your business, but you determine you are going to speak less, and you are going to listen more; or perhaps you go away to a place. One of the wisdoms that has come down in the practice of this spiritual discipline from the early Church is the idea of going on a retreat – on a personal retreat – and actually, the whole monastic movement started as a lifelong retreat into the desert, where these desert fathers would go to listen for God and to commune with God. They literally took themselves out of the noise of everyday life in order to devote their lives to silence and contemplation and prayer, and out of that came incredible wisdom.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, my, yes. And then, one final idea, which loops back to something we said earlier: Worship – worship services. If you are a preacher or a worship planner, or even if you are not; if you can talk to people on your worship committee, ask for more silence in worship. Maybe it does not have to be all the time, but just so you know, maybe two out of four Sundays could we not have that music playing before the prelude? Could we not have that countdown video going? Can we encourage people to enter this week in silence? Next week, if they want to come in and chat and watch a video, okay; but how about this week we do not? How about we regularly have a silent prayer of confession, and let it go a while? These days, if there is 30 seconds of silence, people feel like it is forever because they are so unaccustomed to any silence before God that 15 seconds is enough to make some people start shifting in their pews.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; fidgety.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We need to get used to it more and encourage our worship leaders to give us those times just to be in solitude and silence in worship.

DAVE BAST

One last thought to loop us back to the early part of this program. If Jesus, the Son of God in the flesh, felt that He had to have times of silence and solitude in order to commune with His Father, can we expect that it would be any different for us?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed; well, thank you for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. Please tell us how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture; and you can do that by visiting our website: groundworkonline.com. You will find a place there to send us topics, and also passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/silence-solitude>

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