

Celebration of Discipline

The Path to Spiritual Growth

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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HarperSanFrancisco
A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers

7. The Discipline of Solitude

Settle yourself in solitude and you will come upon Him in yourself.

---TERESA OF ÁVILA

Jesus calls us from loneliness to solitude. The fear of being left alone petrifies people. A new child in the neighborhood sobs to her mother, "No one ever plays with me." A college freshman yearns for his high school days when he was the center of attention: "Now, I'm a nobody." A business executive sits dejected in her office, powerful, yet alone. An old woman lies in a nursing home waiting to go "Home."

Our fear of being alone drives us to noise and crowds. We keep up a constant stream of words even if they are inane. We buy radios that strap to our wrists or fit over our ears so that, if no one else is around, at least we are not condemned to silence. T. S. Eliot analyzes our culture well when he writes, "Where shall the world be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence."¹

But loneliness or clutter are not our only alternatives. We can cultivate an inner solitude and silence that sets us free from loneliness and fear. Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment.

Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place. There is a solitude of the heart that can be maintained at all times. Crowds, or the lack of them, have little to do with this inward attentiveness. It is quite possible to be a desert hermit and never experience solitude. But if we possess inward solitude we do not fear being alone, for we know that we are not alone. Neither do we fear being with others, for they do not control us. In the midst of noise and confusion we are settled

into a deep inner silence. Whether alone or among people, we always carry with us a portable sanctuary of the heart.

Inward solitude has outward manifestations. There is the freedom to be alone, not in order to be away from people but in order to hear the divine Whisper better. Jesus lived in inward "heart solitude." He also frequently experienced outward solitude. He inaugurated his ministry by spending forty days alone in the desert (Matt. 4:1-11). Before he chose the twelve he spent the entire night alone in the desert hills (Luke 6:12). When he received the news of John the Baptist's death, he "withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart" (Matt. 14:13). After the miraculous feeding of the five thousand Jesus "went up into the hills by himself . . ." (Matt. 14:23). Following a long night of work, "in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place . . ." (Mark 1:35). When the twelve returned from a preaching and healing mission, Jesus instructed them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place" (Mark 6:31). Following the healing of a leper Jesus "withdrew to the wilderness and prayed" (Luke 5:16). With three disciples he sought out the silence of a lonely mountain as the stage for the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-9). As he prepared for his highest and most holy work, Jesus sought the solitude of the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46). I could go on, but perhaps this is sufficient to show that the seeking out of solitary places was a regular practice for Jesus. So it should be for us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* titled one of his chapters "The Day Together" and the following chapter "The Day Alone." Both are essential for spiritual success. He writes, "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. . . . Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. . . . Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair."²

Therefore, we must seek out the recreating stillness of soli-

tude if we want to be with others meaningfully. We must seek the fellowship and accountability of others if we want to be alone safely. We must cultivate both if we are to live in obedience.

Solitude and Silence

Without silence there is no solitude. Though silence sometimes involves the absence of speech, it always involves the act of listening. Simply to refrain from talking, without a heart listening to God, is not silence. "A day filled with noise and voices can be a day of silence, if the noises become for us the echo of the presence of God, if the voices are, for us, messages and solicitations of God. When we speak of ourselves and are filled with ourselves, we leave silence behind. When we repeat the intimate words of God that he has left within us, our silence remains intact."³

We must understand the connection between inner solitude and inner silence; they are inseparable. All the masters of the interior life speak of the two in the same breath. For example, *The Imitation of Christ*, which has been the unchallenged masterpiece of devotional literature for five hundred years, has a section titled "On the Love of Solitude and Silence." Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes the two an inseparable whole in *Life Together* as does Thomas Merton in *Thoughts in Solitude*. In fact, I wrestled for some time trying to decide whether to title this chapter the Discipline of solitude or the Discipline of silence, so closely connected are the two in the great devotional literature. Of necessity, therefore, we must come to understand and experience the transforming power of silence if we are to know solitude.

There is an old proverb to the effect that "all those who open their mouths, close their eyes!" The purpose of silence and solitude is to be able to see and hear. Control rather than no noise is the key to silence. James saw clearly that the person who could control his tongue is perfect (James 3:1-12). Under the Discipline of silence and solitude we learn when to speak and

when to refrain from speaking. The person who views the Disciplines as laws will always turn silence into an absurdity: "I'll not speak for the next forty days!" This is always a severe temptation to any true disciple who wants to live under silence and solitude. Thomas à Kempis writes, "It is easier to be silent altogether than to speak with moderation."⁴ The wise preacher of Ecclesiastes says that there is "a time to keep silence and a time to speak" (Eccles. 3:7). Control is the key.

James' analogies of the rudder and the bridle suggest to us that the tongue guides as well as controls. The tongue guides our course in many ways. If we tell a lie, we are led to telling more lies to cover up the first lie. Soon we are forced to behave in a certain way in order to give credence to the lie. No wonder James declares that "the tongue is a fire" (James 3:6).

The disciplined person is the person who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. The mark of a championship basketball team is a team that can score points when they are needed. Most of us can get the ball into the hoop eventually, but we can't do it when it is needed. Likewise, a person who is under the Discipline of silence is a person who can say what needs to be said when it needs to be said. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (Prov. 25:11). If we are silent when we should speak, we are not living in the Discipline of silence. If we speak when we should be silent, we again miss the mark.

The Sacrifice of Fools

In Ecclesiastes we read, "To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools" (Eccles. 5:1). The sacrifice of fools is humanly initiated religious talk. The preacher continues, "Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few" (Eccles. 5:2).

When Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to the mountain and was transfigured before them, Moses and Elijah appeared

and carried on a conversation with Jesus. The Greek text goes on to say, "And *answering*, Peter said to them . . . if you will I will make here three shelters . . ." (Matt. 17:4, [italics added]). That is so telling. No one was even speaking to Peter. He was offering the sacrifice of fools.

John Woolman's *Journal* contains a moving and tender account of learning control over the tongue. His words are so graphic that they are best quoted in full:

"I went to meetings in an awful frame of mind, and endeavored to be inwardly acquainted with the language of the true Shepherd. One day, being under a strong exercise of spirit, I stood up and said some words in a meeting; but not keeping close to the Divine opening, I said more than was required of me. Being soon sensible of my error, I was afflicted in mind some weeks, without any light or comfort, even to that degree that I could not take satisfaction in anything. I remembered God, and was troubled, and in the depth of my distress he had pity upon me, and sent the Comforter. I then felt forgiveness for my offence; my mind became calm and quiet, and I was truly thankful to my gracious Redeemer for his mercies. About six weeks after this, feeling the spring of Divine love opened, and a concern to speak, I said a few words in a meeting, in which I found peace. Being thus humbled and disciplined under the cross, my understanding became more strengthened to distinguish the pure spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart, and which taught me to wait in silence sometimes many weeks together, until I felt that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet, through which the Lord speaks to his flock."⁵

What a description of the learning process one goes through in the Discipline of silence! Of particular significance was Woolman's increased ability from this experience to "distinguish the pure spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart."

One reason we can hardly bear to remain silent is that it makes us feel so helpless. We are so accustomed to relying

upon words to manage and control others. If we are silent, who will take control? God will take control, but we will never let him take control until we trust him. Silence is intimately related to trust.

The tongue is our most powerful weapon of manipulation. A frantic stream of words flows from us because we are in a constant process of adjusting our public image. We fear so deeply what we think other people see in us that we talk in order to straighten out their understanding. If I have done some wrong thing (or even some right thing that I think you may misunderstand) and discover that you know about it, I will be very tempted to help you understand my action! Silence is one of the deepest Disciplines of the Spirit simply because it puts the stopper on all self-justification.

One of the fruits of silence is the freedom to let God be our justifier. We don't need to straighten others out. There is a story of a medieval monk who was being unjustly accused of certain offenses. One day he looked out his window and saw a dog biting and tearing on a rug that had been hung out to dry. As he watched, the Lord spoke to him saying, "That is what is happening to your reputation. But if you will trust me, I will care for you—reputation and all." Perhaps more than anything else, silence brings us to believe that God can care for us—"reputation and all."

George Fox often speaks of "the spirit of bondage" and how the world lays in that spirit. Frequently he identifies the spirit of bondage with the spirit of subservience to other human beings. In his *Journal* he speaks of "bringing people off of men," away from that spirit of bondage to law through other human beings. And silence is one way of bringing us into this liberation.

The tongue is a thermometer; it gives us our spiritual temperature. It is also a thermostat; it regulates our spiritual temperature. Control of the tongue can mean everything. Have we been set free so that we can hold our tongue? Bonhoeffer writes, "Real silence, real stillness, really holding one's tongue

comes only as the sober consequence of spiritual stiffness.⁶⁶ St. Dominic is reported to have visited St. Francis, and throughout the entire meeting neither spoke a single word. Only when we learn to be truly silent are we able to speak the word that is needed *when* it is needed.

Catherine de Haeck Doherty writes, "All in me is silent and . . . I am immersed in the silence of God."⁶⁷ It is in solitude that we come to experience the "silence of God" and so receive the inner silence that is the craving of our hearts.]

The Dark Night of the Soul

To take seriously the Discipline of solitude will mean that at some point or points along the pilgrimage we will enter what St. John of the Cross vividly describes as "the dark night of the soul." The "dark night" to which he calls us is not something bad or destructive. On the contrary, it is an experience to be welcomed much as a sick person might welcome a surgery that promises health and well-being. The purpose of the darkness is not to punish or to afflict us. It is to set us free. It is a divine appointment, a privileged opportunity to draw close to the divine Center. St. John calls it "sheer grace," adding:

O guiding night!

O night more lovely than the dawn!

O night that has united

The Lover with His beloved,

Transforming the beloved in her Lover.⁶⁸

What does the dark night of the soul involve? We may have a sense of dryness, aloneness, even lostness. Any overdependence on the emotional life is stripped away. The notion, often heard today, that such experiences should be avoided and that we always should live in peace and comfort, joy, and celebration only betrays the fact that much contemporary experience is surface slush. The dark night is one of the ways God brings us into a hush, a stillness so that he may work an inner transformation upon the soul.

How is this dark night expressed in daily life? When solitude is seriously pursued, there is usually a flush of initial success and then an inevitable letdown—and with it a desire to abandon the pursuit altogether. Feelings leave and there is the sense that we are not getting through to God. St. John of the Cross describes it this way, ". . . the darkness of the soul mentioned here . . . puts the sensory and spiritual appetites to sleep. . . . It binds the imagination and impedes it from doing any good discursive work. It makes the memory cease, the intellect become dark and unable to understand anything, and hence it causes the will also to become arid and constrained, and all the faculties empty and useless. And over all this hangs a dense and burdensome cloud which afflicts the soul and keeps it withdrawn from God."⁶⁹

Twice in his poem "*Canciones del Alma*" St. John of the Cross uses the phrase, "My house being now all stilled."⁷⁰ In this graphic line he indicates the importance of allowing all the physical, emotional, psychological, even spiritual senses to be silenced. Every distraction of the body, mind, and spirit must be put into a kind of suspended animation before this deep work of God upon the soul can occur. It is like an operation in which the anesthetic must take effect before the surgery can be performed. There comes inner silence, peace, stillness. During such a time Bible reading, sermons, intellectual debate—all fail to move or excite us.

When God lovingly draws us into a dark night of the soul, there is often a temptation to seek release from it and to blame everyone and everything for our inner dullness. The preacher is such a bore. The hymn singing is too weak. The worship service is so dull. We may begin to look around for another church or a new experience to give us "spiritual goose bumps." This is a serious mistake. Recognize the dark night for what it is. Be grateful that God is lovingly drawing you away from every distraction so that you can see him clearly. Rather than chafing and fighting, become still and wait.

I am not referring here to the dullness to spiritual things that

comes as a result of sin or disobedience, but I am speaking of the person who is seeking hard after God and who harbors no known sin in his heart.

Who among you fears the Lord
and obeys the voice of his servant,
who walks in darkness
and has no light,
yet trusts in the name of the Lord
and relies upon his God? (Isa. 50:10, [italics added])

The point of the biblical passage is that it is quite possible to fear, obey, trust, and rely upon the Lord and still "walk in darkness and have no light." We are living in obedience but we have entered a dark night of the soul.

St. John of the Cross indicates that during this experience there is a gracious protection from vices and a wonderful advance in the things of the kingdom of God. ". . . a person at the time of these darkneses . . . will see clearly how little the appetites and faculties are distracted with useless and harmful things and how secure he is from vainglory, from pride and presumption, from an empty and false joy, and from many other evils. By walking in darkness the soul . . . advances rapidly, because it thus gains the virtues."¹¹

What should we do during such a time of inward darkness? First, disregard the advice of well-meaning friends to snap out of it. They do not understand what is occurring. Our age is so ignorant of such things that I recommend that you not even talk about these matters. Above all, do not try to explain or justify why you may be "out of sorts." God is your justifier; rest your case with him. If you can actually withdraw to a "desert place" for a season, do so. If not, go about your daily tasks. But whether in the "desert" or at home, hold in your heart a deep, inner, listening silence and there be still until the work of solitude is done.

Perhaps St. John of the Cross has been leading us into deeper

waters than we care to go. Certainly he is talking about a realm that most of us see only "through a glass darkly." Yet we do not need to censure ourselves for our timidity to scale these snowy peaks of the soul. These matters are best approached cautiously. But perhaps he has stirred within us a drawing toward higher and deeper experiences, no matter how slight the tug. It is like opening the door of our lives ever so slightly to this realm. That is all God asks, and all he needs.

To conclude our journey into the dark night of the soul, let us ponder these powerful words of our spiritual mentor: "Oh, then, spiritual soul, when you see your appetites darkened, your inclinations dry and constricted, your faculties incapacitated for any interior exercise, do not be afflicted; think of this as a grace, since God is freeing you from yourself and taking from you your own activity."¹²

Steps into Solitude

The Spiritual Disciplines are things that we do. We must never lose sight of this fact. It is one thing to talk piously about "the solitude of the heart," but if that does not somehow work its way into our experience, then we have missed the point of the Disciplines. We are dealing with actions, not merely states of mind. It is not enough to say, "Well, I am most certainly in possession of inner solitude and silence; there is nothing that I need to do." All those who have come into the living silences have done certain things, have ordered their lives in a particular way so as to receive this "peace that passes all understanding." If we are to succeed, we must pass beyond the theoretical into life situations.

What are some steps into solitude? The first thing we can do is to take advantage of the "little solitudes" that fill our day. Consider the solitude of those early morning moments in bed before the family awakens. Think of the solitude of a morning cup of coffee before beginning the work of the day. There is

the solitude of bumper-to-bumper traffic during the freeway rush hour. There can be little moments of rest and refreshment when we turn a corner and see a flower or a tree. Instead of vocal prayer before a meal consider inviting everyone to join into a few moments of gathered silence. Once while driving a carload of chattering children and adults, I exclaimed, "Let's play a game and see if everyone can be absolutely quiet until we reach the airport" (about five minutes away). It worked, blessedly so. Find new joy and meaning in the little walk from the subway to your apartment. Slip outside just before bed and taste the silent night.

These tiny snatches of time are often lost to us. What a pity! They can and should be redeemed. They are times for inner quiet, for reorienting our lives like a compass needle. They are little moments that help us to be genuinely present where we are.

What else can we do? We can find or develop a "quiet place" designed for silence and solitude. Homes are being built constantly. Why not insist that a little inner sanctuary be put into the plans, a small place where any family member could go to be alone and silent? What's to stop us? The money? We build elaborate playrooms and family rooms and think it well worth the expense. Those who already own a home could consider enclosing a little section of the garage or patio. Those who live in an apartment could be creative and find other ways to allow for solitude. I know of one family that has a special chair, whenever anyone sits in it he or she is saying, "Please don't bother me, I want to be alone."

Let's find places outside the home: a spot in a park, a church sanctuary that is kept unlocked, even a storage closet somewhere. A retreat center near us has built a lovely one-person cabin specifically for private meditation and solitude. It is called "The Quiet Place." Churches invest millions of dollars in buildings. How about constructing one place where an individual can come to be alone for several days? Catherine de Haack Doherty has pioneered in developing "Poustinias" (a Russian

word meaning "desert") in North America. These are places specifically designed for solitude and silence.*

In the chapter on study we considered the importance of observing ourselves to see how often our speech is a frantic attempt to explain and justify our actions. Having seen this in ourselves, let's experiment with doing deeds without any words of explanation whatever. We note our sense of fear that people will misunderstand why we have done what we have done. We seek to allow God to be our justifier.

Let's discipline ourselves so that our words are few and full. Let's become known as people who have something to say when we speak. Let's maintain plain speech: do what we say we will do. "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay" (Eccles. 5:5). When our tongue is under our authority the words of Bonhoeffer become true of us: "Much that is unnecessary remains unsaid. But the essential and the helpful thing can be said in a few words."¹³

Go another step. Try to live one entire day without words at all. Do it not as a law, but as an experiment. Note your feelings of helplessness and excessive dependence upon words to communicate. Try to find new ways to relate to others that are not dependent upon words. Enjoy, savor the day. Learn from it.

Four times a year withdraw for three to four hours for the purpose of reorienting your life goals. This can easily be done in one evening. Stay late at your office or do it at home or find a quiet corner in a public library. Reevaluate your goals and objectives in life. What do you want to have accomplished one year from now? Ten years from now? Our tendency is to overestimate what we can accomplish in one year and underestimate what we can accomplish in ten years. Set realistic goals but be willing to dream, to stretch. (This book was a dream in my mind for several years before it became a reality.) In the

*The story of the development of these centers is described in her book, *Poustinias: Christian Spirituality of the East for Western Man* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1974).

quiet of those brief hours, listen to the thunder of God's silence. Keep a journal record of what comes to you.

Reorientation and goal setting do not need to be cold and calculating as some suppose. Goals are discovered, not made. God delights in showing us exciting new alternatives for the future. Perhaps as you enter into a listening silence the joyful impression to learn how to weave or how to make pottery emerges. Does that sound too earthy, too unspiritual a goal? God is intently interested in such matters. Are you? Maybe you will want to learn and experience more about the spiritual gifts of miracles, healing, and tongues. Or you may do as one of my friends: spend large periods of time experiencing the gift of helps, learning to be a servant. Perhaps this next year you would like to read all the writings of C. S. Lewis or D. Elton Trueblood. Maybe five years from now you would like to be qualified to work with handicapped children. Does choosing these goals sound like a sales manipulation game? Of course not. It is merely setting a direction for your life. You are going to go somewhere so how much better to have a direction that has been set by communion with the divine Center.

Under the Discipline of study we explored the idea of study retreats of two to three days' duration. Such experiences are heightened when they are combined with an inner immersion into the silence of God. Like Jesus, we must go away from people so that we can be truly present when we are with people. Take a retreat once a year with no other purpose in mind but solitude.

The fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others. There comes a new freedom to be with people. There is new attentiveness to their needs, new responsiveness to their hurts. Thomas Merton observes, "It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them. . . . Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say."¹⁴

Don't you feel a tug, a yearning to sink down into the silence

and solitude of God? Don't you long for something more? Doesn't every breath crave a deeper, fuller exposure to his Presence? It is the Discipline of solitude that will open the door. You are welcome to come in and "listen to God's speech in his wondrous, terrible, gentle, loving, all-embracing silence."¹⁵

Not only must we understand, but we need to underscore it to ourselves again and again so severe is our temptation to center on the Disciplines. Let us forever center on Christ and view the Spiritual Disciplines as a way of drawing us closer to his heart.

The Freedom in Submission

I said that every Discipline has its corresponding freedom. What freedom corresponds to submission? It is the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always needing to get our own way. The obsession to demand that things go the way we want them to go is one of the greatest bondages in human society today. People will spend weeks, months, even years in a perpetual stew because some little thing did not go as they wished. They will fuss and fume. They will get mad about it. They will act as if their very life hangs on the issue. They may even get an ulcer over it.

In the Discipline of submission we are released to drop the matter, to forget it. Frankly, most things in life are not nearly as important as we think they are. Our lives will not come to an end if this or that does not happen.

If you will watch these things, you will see, for example, that almost all church fights and splits occur because people do not have the freedom to give in to each other. We insist that a critical issue is at stake; we are fighting for a sacred principle. Perhaps this is the case. Usually it is not. Often we cannot stand to give in simply because it means that we will not get our own way. Only in submission are we enabled to bring this spirit to a place where it no longer controls us. Only submission can free us sufficiently to enable us to distinguish between genuine issues and stubborn self-will.

If we could only come to see that most things in life are not major issues, then we could hold them lightly. We discover that they are no "big deal." So often we say, "Well, I don't care," when what we really mean (and what we convey to others) is

8. The Discipline of Submission

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

—MARTIN LUTHER

Of all the Spiritual Disciplines none has been more abused than the Discipline of submission. Somehow the human species has an extraordinary knack for taking the best teaching and turning it to the worst ends. Nothing can put people into bondage like religion, and nothing in religion has done more to manipulate and destroy people than a deficient teaching on submission. Therefore, we must work our way through this Discipline with great care and discernment in order to ensure that we are the ministers of life, not death.

Every Discipline has its corresponding freedom. If I have schooled myself in the art of rhetoric, I am free to deliver a moving speech when the occasion requires it. Demosthenes was free to be an orator only because he had gone through the discipline of speaking above the ocean roar with pebbles in his mouth. The purpose of the Disciplines is freedom. Our aim is the freedom, not the Discipline. The moment we make the Discipline our central focus, we turn it into law and lose the corresponding freedom.

The Disciplines are for the purpose of realizing a greater good. In and of themselves they are of no value whatever. They have value only as a means of setting us before God so that he can give us the liberation we seek. The liberation is the end; the Disciplines are *merely* the means. They are not the answer; they only lead us to the Answer. We must clearly understand this limitation of the Disciplines if we are to avoid bondage.

that we care a great deal. It is precisely here that silence fits in so well with all the other Disciplines. Usually the best way to handle most matters of submission is to say nothing. There is the need for an all-encompassing spirit of grace beyond any kind of language or action which sets others and ourselves free.

The biblical teaching on submission focuses primarily on the spirit with which we view other people. Scripture does not attempt to set forth a series of hierarchical relationships but to communicate to us an inner attitude of mutual subordination. Peter, for example, called upon the slaves of his day to live in submission to their masters (1 Pet. 2:18). The counsel seems unnecessary until we realize that it is quite possible for servants to obey their masters without living in a spirit of submission to them. Outwardly we can do what people ask and inwardly be in rebellion against them. This concern for a spirit of consideration toward others pervades the entire New Testament. The old covenant stipulated that we must not murder. Jesus, however, stressed that the real issue was the inner spirit of murder with which we view people. In the matter of submission the same is true; the real issue is the spirit of consideration and respect we have for each other.

In submission we are at last free to value other people. Their dreams and plans become important to us. We have entered into a new, wonderful, glorious freedom—the freedom to give up our own rights for the good of others. For the first time we can love people unconditionally. We have given up the right to demand that they return our love. No longer do we feel that we have to be treated in a certain way. We rejoice in their successes. We feel genuine sorrow in their failures. It is of little consequence that our plans are frustrated if their plans succeed. We discover that it is far better to serve our neighbor than to have our own way.

Do you know the liberation that comes from giving up your rights? It means you are set free from the seething anger and bitterness you feel when someone doesn't act toward you the way you think they should. It means that at last you are able

to break that vicious law of commerce that says, "You scratch my back, I'll scratch your back; you bloody my nose, I'll bloody your nose." It means you are free to obey Jesus' command, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). It means that for the first time you understand how it is possible to surrender the right to retaliate: "If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39).

A Touchstone

You may have noticed that I have been approaching the matter of submission through the back door. I began by explaining what it does for us before defining what it is. This has been done for a purpose. Most of us have been exposed to such a mutilated form of biblical submission that either we have embraced the deformity or we have rejected the Discipline altogether. To do the former leads to self-hatred; to do the latter leads to self-glorification. Before we become hung on the horns of this dilemma, let's consider a third alternative.

The touchstone for the biblical understanding of submission is Jesus' astonishing statement, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Almost instinctively we draw back from these words. We are much more comfortable with words like "self-fulfillment" and "self-actualization" than we are with the thought of "self-denial." (In reality, Jesus' teaching on self-denial is the only thing that will bring genuine self-fulfillment and self-actualization.) Self-denial conjures up in our minds all sorts of images of groveling and self-hatred. We imagine that it most certainly means the rejection of our individuality and will probably lead to various forms of self-mortification.

On the contrary, Jesus calls us to self-denial without self-hatred. Self-denial is simply a way of coming to understand that we do not have to have our own way. Our happiness is not dependent upon getting what we want.

Self-denial does not mean the loss of our identity as some suppose. Without our identity we could not even be subject to each other. Did Jesus lose his identity when he set his face toward Golgotha? Did Peter lose his identity when he responded to Jesus' cross-bearing command, "Follow me" (*John 21:19*)? Did Paul lose his identity when he committed himself to the One who had said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (*Acts 9:16*)? Of course not. We know that the opposite was true. They found their identity in the act of self-denial.

Self-denial is not the same thing as self-contempt. Self-contempt claims that we have no worth, and even if we do have worth, we should reject it. Self-denial declares that we are of infinite worth and shows us how to realize it. Self-contempt denies the goodness of the creation; self-denial affirms that it is indeed good. Jesus made the ability to love ourselves the prerequisite for our reaching out to others (*Matt. 22:39*). Self-love and self-denial are not in conflict. More than once Jesus made it quite clear that self-denial is the only sure way to love ourselves. "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (*Matt. 10:39*).

Again, we must underscore that self-denial means the freedom to give way to others. It means to hold others' interests above our interests. In this way self-denial releases us from self-pity. When we live outside of self-denial, we demand that things go our way. When they do not, we revert to self-pity—"Poor me!" Outwardly we may submit but we do so in a spirit of martyrdom. This spirit of self-pity, of martyrdom, is a sure sign that the Discipline of submission has gone to seed. This is why self-denial is the foundation for submission; it saves us from self-indulgence.

Modern men and women find it extremely difficult to read the great devotional masters because they make such lavish use of the language of self-denial. It is hard for us to be open to the words of Thomas à Kempis, "To have no opinion of ourselves, and to think always well and highly of others, is great

wisdom and perfection."¹ We struggle to listen to the words of Jesus, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (*Mark 8:34*). Our difficulty is due primarily to the fact that we have failed to understand Jesus' teaching that the way to self-fulfillment is through self-denial. To save the life is to lose it; to lose it for Christ's sake is to save it (*Mark 8:35*). George Matheson set into the hymnody of the Church this wonderful paradox of fulfillment through self-denial:

Make me a captive, Lord,
And then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword,
And I shall conqueror be.
I sink in life's alarms
When by myself I stand;
Imprison me within Thine arms,
And strong shall be my hand.²

Perhaps the air has been sufficiently cleared so that we can look upon self-denial as the liberation that it really is. We must be convinced of this for, as has been stated, self-denial is the touchstone for the Discipline of submission.

Revolutionary Subordination as Taught by Jesus*

The most radical social teaching of Jesus was his total reversal of the contemporary notion of greatness. Leadership is found in becoming the servant of all. Power is discovered in submission. The foremost symbol of this radical servanthood is the cross. "He [Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (*Phil. 2:8*). But note this: Christ not only died a "cross-death," he lived a "cross-life." The way of the cross, the way of a suffering servant was essential to his

*I am indebted to John Howard Yoder for this term and for several of the ideas listed under it. His book, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), contains an excellent chapter on Revolutionary Subordination.

ml. -cy. Jesus lived the cross-life in submission to all human beings. He was the servant of all. He flatly rejected the cultural givens of position and power when he said, "You are not to be called rabbi. . . . Neither be called masters. . ." (Matt. 23:8-10). Jesus shattered the customs of his day when he lived out the cross-life by taking women seriously and by being willing to meet with children. He lived the cross-life when he took a towel and washed the feet of his disciples. This Jesus who easily could have called down a legion of angels to his aid chose instead the cross-death of Calvary. Jesus' life was the cross-life of submission and service. Jesus' death was the cross-death of conquest by suffering.

It is impossible to overstate the revolutionary character of Jesus' life and teaching at this point. It did away with all the claims to privileged position and status. It called into being a whole new order of leadership. The cross-life of Jesus undermined all social orders based on power and self-interest.*

As I noted earlier, Jesus called his followers to live the cross-life. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). He flatly told his disciples, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). When Jesus immortalized the principle of the cross-life by washing the disciples' feet, he added, "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). The cross-life is the life of voluntary submission. The cross-life is the life of freely accepted servanthood.

*The Church today has failed to understand or, if it understands, has failed to obey the implications of the cross-life for human society. Guy Hershberger courageously explores some of these implications in his book, *The Way of the Cross in Human Relations* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1958). He discusses how the way of servanthood should affect such issues as war, capitalism, trade unions, labor unions, materialism, employer-employee relations, race relations, and others. I am indebted to Hershberger for the term "cross-life."

Revolutionary Subordination as Taught in the Epistles

Jesus' example and call to follow the way of the cross in all human relationships form the basis for the teaching of the Epistles on submission. The apostle Paul grounds the imperative to the Church to "count others better than yourselves" in the submission and self-denial of the Lord for our salvation. "He . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:4-7). The apostle Peter, in the middle of his instructions on submission, directly appeals to the example of Jesus as the reason for submission. "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. . . . When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:21-23). As a preface to the Ephesian *Haustafel** we read, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21, [italics added]). The call for Christians to live the cross-life is rooted in the cross-life of Jesus himself.

The Discipline of submission has been terribly misconstrued and abused from failure to see this wider context. Submission is an ethical theme that runs the gamut of the New Testament. It is a posture obligatory upon *all* Christians: men as well as women, fathers as well as children, masters as well as slaves. We are commanded to live a life of submission because Jesus lived a life of submission, not because we are in a particular place or station in life. Self-denial is a posture fitting for all those who follow the crucified Lord. Everywhere in the *Haustafel* the one and only compelling reason for submission is the example of Jesus.

This singular rationale for submission is staggering when we compare it to other first-century writings. In them there was a

*A term coined by Martin Luther meaning literally "house-table," hence a table of rules for the Christian household. The *Haustafel* has come to be recognized as a particular literary form and can be found in Ephesians 5:21-6:9, Colossians 3:18-4:1, Titus 2:4-10, and 1 Peter 2:18-3:7.

constant appeal to submission because that was the way the gods had created things; it was one's station in life. Not a single New Testament writer appeals to submission on that basis. The teaching is revolutionary. They completely ignored all the contemporary customs of superordinate and subordinate and called everyone to "count others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3).

The Epistles first call to subordination those who, by virtue of the given culture, are already subordinate. "Wives, be subject to your husbands. . . . Children, obey your parents. . . . Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters. . ." (Col. 3:18-22 and parallels). The revolutionary thing about this teaching is that these people, to whom first-century culture afforded no choice at all, are addressed as free moral agents. Paul gave personal moral responsibility to those who had no legal or moral status in their culture. He made decision-makers of people who were forbidden to make decisions.

It is astonishing that Paul called them to subordination since they were already subordinate by virtue of their place in first-century culture. The only meaningful reason for such a command was the fact that by virtue of the gospel message they had come to see themselves as free from a subordinate status in society. The gospel had challenged all second-class citizenships, and they knew it. Paul urged voluntary subordination not because it was their station in life, but because it was "fitting in the Lord" (Col. 3:18).

This feature of addressing moral teaching to the cultural subordinates is also a radical contrast to the contemporary literature of the day. The Stoics, for example, addressed *only* the person on the top side of the social order, encouraging him to do a good job in the superordinate position he already saw as his place. But Paul spoke first to the people that his culture said should not even be addressed and called them to the cross-life of Jesus.

Next, the Epistles turned to the culturally dominant partner in the relationship and also called him to the cross-life of Jesus.

The imperative to subordination is reciprocal. "Husbands, love your wives. . . . Fathers, do not provoke your children. . . . Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly. . ." (Col. 3:19-4:1 and parallels). Some most certainly will object that the command to the dominant partner does not use the language of submission. What we fail to see is how much submission those commands demanded of the dominant partner in his cultural setting. For a first-century husband, father, or master to obey Paul's injunction would make a dramatic difference in his behavior. The first-century wife, child, or slave would not need to change one whit to follow Paul's command. If anything, the sting of the teaching falls upon the dominant partner.³

Further, we need to see that these imperatives to husbands, fathers, and masters constitute another form of self-denial. They are just another set of words to convey the same truth, namely, that we can be set free from the need to have things our own way. If a husband loves his wife, he will live in consideration of her needs. He will be willing to give in to her. He will be free to regard her as more important than his own needs. He will be able to regard his children as more important than his own needs (Phil. 2:3).

In Ephesians Paul exhorts slaves to live in a spirit of joyful, voluntary, willing service to their earthly masters. Then he exhorts masters, "Do the same to them" (Eph. 6:9). Such a thought was incredible in first-century society. Slaves were chattel, not human beings. Yet Paul with divine authority counsels masters to give way to the needs of their slaves.

Perhaps the most perfect illustration of revolutionary subordination is found in Paul's tiny letter to Philemon. Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, had become a Christian. He was returning voluntarily to Philemon as part of what it meant for him to be a disciple of Christ. Paul urges Philemon to welcome Onesimus "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother. . ." (Philem. 16). John Yoder remarks, "This amounts to Paul's instructing Philemon, in the kind of non-coercive instruction which is fitting for a Christian brother. . . .

that Onesimus is to be set free.⁶⁴ Onesimus was to be subordinate to Philemon by returning. Philemon was to be subordinate to Onesimus by setting him free. Both were to be mutually subordinate out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21).

The Epistles did not consecrate the existing hierarchical social structure. By making the command to subordination universal they relativized and undercut it. They called for Christians to live as citizens of a new order, and the most fundamental feature of this new order is universal subordination. J