

Top Ten FAQs about Practicing Silence

1. *Why is practicing silence so hard?*

Most of us have never practiced being silent. Imagine having never exercised your entire life and then trying to sprint a mile. It would be very difficult. Over time, however, it would get much easier. The same is true when it comes to exercising the spiritual muscle that enables you to pay attention to God through silence. Remember, it is God who commands us to be still in his presence (Psalm 37:7, 46:10). This means God has also given us the capacity to attend to him in this way. In fact, every human being has a contemplative dimension that actually longs for silence with God. A relationship with God requires we stop talking all the time so we can develop the capacity to simply enjoy being with him.

2. *How is spending time in silence different from Eastern meditation, New Age practices, or secular programs on mindfulness?*

We should not be surprised that other religions utilize the practice of silence. Many other faiths also have communal worship, sacred texts or scriptures, and spiritual disciplines, etc.. The significant difference between Christian meditation and other kinds of meditation is that we are not attempting to empty our minds into nothingness or to achieve an altered state of consciousness. Instead, we practice silence to focus our minds on God and to spend time in his presence. This type of prayer is not new or New Age. Its roots extend as far back in Scripture as Moses and Elijah, continue into the New Testament with John the Baptist and Jesus, and have persisted throughout more than 2,000 years of Christian history. In silence we are simply being with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moreover, this kind of prayer is part of our larger prayer life that includes worship, confession, petitions, etc.

3. *Why should I practice silence every day? Isn't once or twice a year on retreat enough?*

In silence our aim is to be with God. As Thomas Keating has said so well, silence expresses our intent to surrender our will to God's presence and action. Practicing silence is about cultivating our personal relationship with God.

4. *How much time should I spend in silence each day?*

I used to recommend beginning with two minutes a day (see [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Day by Day](#)). But lately I've been recommending that people start with five minutes a day and slowly increase the time until they are spending fifteen to twenty minutes each day in silence. The [Centering Prayer](#) ministry (filled with great resources) recommends twenty minutes twice a day—once in the morning and once in the evening. My practice is to spend 20 minutes in silence as part of my morning office. For me, early morning—before the activities of the day begin—is best, but that is not possible for everyone. I also integrate briefer times (one to ten minutes) of silence during my midday and evening offices.

5. *What can I do when my mind wanders?*

This is the number-one challenge for most people. You are not alone! Our minds can wander 100 times in a five-minute period! Here are the three things I do when my mind wanders. First, before entering silence, I spend time reading Scripture, a devotional passage, or writing in a journal if I have a lot on my mind. This helps to focus and settle my thoughts before I begin my time of silence. Second, when my thoughts wander, I redirect my attention to my breathing, focusing on both inhalation and exhalation as gifts of God. Focusing on the rhythm of breathing in and out is a practice used quite a bit among Orthodox Christians and is commonly talked about in secular settings as a tool for developing “mindfulness.” And finally, I focus on one word, such as “Abba” or “Jesus” to refocus my conscious thoughts on Christ. This helps to keep me anchored in him.

6. *I don't have a quiet place at home or at work. What do I do?*

It is possible to experience interior silence even when we are unable to have exterior silence. Believe it or not, I have practiced silence in such noisy places as Times Square, subway trains, city buses, airplanes, stairwells, park benches, highway rest stops, my car, on the beach, and empty church buildings. I know schoolteachers who use closets, sanitation workers who used their trucks, and students who use libraries.

7. *What would help me to grow in this practice?*

I sometimes light a candle as a symbol of Christ's presence with me. I use the timer on my phone each morning, setting it for twenty minutes. Scripture is a core component of my time with God—either before or after my time of silence. Meditating on, memorizing, studying, and reading Scripture has become so much richer for me as I have created ample space to be still. I also have a special chair I use in my office, giving me a sense of sacred space that is set apart.

8. *Am I doing it wrong if I don't hear God speak when I am silent?*

The goal of spending time in silence is not necessarily to hear from God but to be with God. When I spend time in silence, I am not looking for guidance, though it often comes. However, I do find that God says a lot when I am quiet! Part of maturing in Christ is not judging the quality of our time with him based on how we feel. The goal is to be with Jesus, not to have a “feel good” experience. And the benefits of spending time in silence go beyond the time itself. For example, greater awareness of God and ourselves throughout the day, feeling more centered and less triggered, having a deeper sense of peacefulness, etc. Just showing up to consistently be with Jesus in silence is an expression of trust and dependence on him. That is means you are definitely doing it right.

9. *What do I do if I don't have enough time and feel rushed?*

I adjust to the time I have allotted. For example, if I have only ten minutes for midday prayer, I structure the limited time I have based on what I need in order to commune with Jesus. This may include more or less silence, reading of Scripture, etc. The goal is not to “get through” a reading or the time set aside for silence. Our aim is to be with Jesus with whatever time we have.

10. *I practiced silence for a while but I got bored and quit.*

Like any other practice in life, you will find your way over time. There is a great deal to learn about the interior movements of your heart and silence with God. Getting started is often the most difficult step, much like starting an exercise routine or any other new habit that requires some planning and effort. However, if you stick with it, chances are you will wonder—as have so many others before you—how you ever lived without it. I encourage you begin by looking at the [Centering Prayer](#) website materials of Thomas Keating, and the resources found at [The Transforming Center](#). And I would encourage you to look up the many evangelical authors who are now writing on the integration of contemplative spirituality within a Protestant theological framework.