



In solitude, we turn our
face toward the God
who so loves this world.

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Stepping Back Before Speaking Out

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he tears welled up in my eyes as the conversation continued. I felt angry, sad, and hurt. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to cause conflict or hurt relationships, but at the same time I had more to say. My husband caught my eye from behind the sofa where the other people sat. He smiled kindly at me and nodded toward the door. I understood. It would be best if I left the room because I was getting upset. I didn't want to lash out in anger or say things I'd regret.

This occurred at a weekend with our small group from church many years ago. They were talking

negatively about some people I knew. I'd initially tried to speak up for them but did not feel heard. As I stood outside in the dark on the cabin's balcony, I cried in frustration.

We each face situations like this in which we feel caught between a rock and a hard place. When we care deeply about people or issues or circumstances, we struggle because we want so desperately for others to understand and share our viewpoint. But because speaking the truth in love can be so challenging (Eph. 4:15), we tend to either speak truth with harshness or say nothing in so-called "love." My experience that night long ago planted within me a desire to explain important things calmly and clearly when I believe God is directing me to speak up.

STEPPING BACK

Over the years I've learned that becoming a person who stands up for people and issues wisely and effectively begins with stepping back. Without times of reflection in which we interact with God in quietness, contemplation, and solitude, we may unconsciously attack people. But by taking time and finding space to be with God, we can process volcanic thoughts and emotions and begin to more clearly see the way forward. Walking through this process enables us to move from a desperate neediness to speak out into imagining what God wants in the situation and how we might partner with God in that. Soaking in God's peace provides clarity and empowers our words and actions to be redirected into an unpretentious, loving, even healing passion.

A rhythm of contemplation and action makes it possible to live life from the very center of ourselves where Jesus dwells. He himself practiced this rhythm. After teaching and feeding a massive crowd, Jesus withdrew into solitude to pray (John 6:1-15); we see this habit in many other passages, including Matthew 14:13, 26:36-46; Mark 6:31; and Luke 5:16, 6:12. During at least one of these frequent retreats, Jesus interrupted his seclusion to move quickly into action when he was asked (Mark 1:35-39).

Such times of solitude and silence are not turning our back to the world and its needs but turning our face toward God. We return more equipped to partner with God, who so loves this world.

A HEART EXAM

In these times of reflection, God often shows us what's in our heart: perhaps that we were hoping to gain "points" for ourselves or to control others. Such a

revelation can stun us as we begin to see how preoccupied we are with results or how accustomed we may be to an attitude of self-congratulation.

This sort of "heart exam" can be tricky because self-deception is so easy. We are likely to either accuse ourselves in a spirit of scrupulosity or give ourselves a pass. A clear hearing of God's heart requires a trust that God truly is for us and is careful not to tell us more than we can handle at any given moment. Then, as we reflect with a listening and prayerful mindset, God supplies Spirit-drenched clarity about ourselves and the situation before us.

For example, as a recovering know-it-all, I'm often self-righteous. Like Elijah on his way to Mount Horeb, I may think, *I'm the only one who gets this!* (1 Kings 19:10, 14). The sad truth is that I sometimes feel I'm better than others or that it's all up to me. That sort of grandiosity poisons not only our own souls but also any conversation we may have with others. They know our eloquent response is more about our having to be right than wanting justice to be done.

These sorts of convicting nudges from God are not scoldings—they are more like conversations with Jesus while sitting on a park bench together. Jesus lets us unload (as the psalmist did in those ranting psalms, such as Psalm 69 or 109) before helping us remember, as Walter Brueggemann notes, that prophets offer both clarity *and hope*. This means that not only does truth need to be stated tactfully, but it also needs to be drenched in confidence in God's ability to redeem any situation. And that redemption often occurs more smoothly when we have cultivated a heart of fairness, humility, and generosity.

Often, in times of solitude and silence, God opens our heart toward the very people we want to confront. We begin to see their brokenness, their earnestness, and even their inner goodness. God changes our perspective: It's often as if we are no longer sitting *across* the table from them in opposition but as if we sit on the same side as a friend.

ASKING GOD QUESTIONS

Taking time to interact with God when we desire to speak out also provides space for us to ask God what our next step might be. Activism without reflection can result in walking through every door that appears to be open. In the quiet, we can explore if an opportunity is truly God's invitation or if it may be one more temptation to assume we shoulder the burdens of the world. When we act primarily on impulse, we end up running on empty and then excusing ourselves because

