

# Can you keep a secret?

How the discipline of secrecy can keep you from being swept away in the ever-changing ocean of others' opinions


**MAY I CONFESS SOMETHING? I CAN BE SIGNIFICANTLY** affected by what others think of me. Significantly affected. What others say can make or break a day for me. As such, I often find that I keep close tabs on others' opinions. The fact of the matter is that I am too dependent on the approval of others. Maybe you can relate.

This dependency starts young. As children we do anything to get a pat on the back or to get a sticker to add to the chart on the fridge. As we get older this addiction to approval seems to become further ingrained. During the teenage years we act cool, sport some attitude and wear trendy clothes because we long for the approval of our peers. Once we hit adulthood the addiction really sets in. We

are certain spiritual disciplines that are particularly helpful in weaning the human heart of its dependency on the approval of others. One such discipline is referred to as the spiritual practice of secrecy. This is not a well-known discipline yet it is rather straightforward.

## Avoiding the spotlight

The discipline of secrecy is focused on doing secret acts of charity, kindness and love. In simple terms, when this discipline is practiced the goal is to serve and bless someone else without their ever knowing it was you. You serve someone and then you keep it a secret.



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choose professions, manage our reputations, work long hours and buy lots of stuff because earning the applause of others is something that we so deeply crave.

The truth is that this is not all bad. Receiving approval from others can be a very good thing. Children need to know that their parents delight in them. Friendships thrive when we know that others enjoy our presence. This is all very beautiful. Rather necessary, in fact.

## Quest to impress

But sometimes this need will drive us more than we care to admit. The quest to impress others can seize the heart and choke all the life from our souls. Unfortunately we seldom realize that we are striving to earn the applause of others. Jesus once commented that it is possible that people can love the praise of people more than approval from God (John 12:43).

Author Henri Nouwen describes our condition like this: "At issue here is the question: 'To whom do I belong? To God or to the world?' Many of my daily preoccupations suggest that I belong more to the world than to God. A little criticism makes me angry, and a little rejection makes me depressed. A little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me.... Often I am like a small boat on the ocean, completely at the mercy of its waves."

Many Christ-followers admit to this struggle of competing allegiances. They long to please God, but often they are swept away in the ever-changing ocean of others' opinions of them.

Throughout the centuries Christians have discovered that there

Author Dallas Willard notes that when we engage in the practice of secrecy "we abstain from causing our good deeds and qualities to be known. (In fact) we may actually even take steps to prevent them being known, as long as it doesn't involve deceit." This is a discipline in which we intentionally turn the spotlight away from our good deeds and ourselves.

When I was in college I was considering a summer job that would not pay very much. It was a tough decision because I needed to make some money so I could pay tuition for the upcoming year. One day I went down to my campus mailbox and found an envelope. It contained \$500 in cash and a note that said something to the effect of "Have a nice summer!" There was no name signed to the note. The giver was mysterious.

This is the practice of secrecy in action. This anonymous sender blessed me by their generosity. There were no clues pointing in a certain direction. They deferred the possible credit and recognition that could have come their way. It was a secret act of kindness.

There are no tight rules about how to practice this spiritual discipline. It can involve financial help, an encouraging note, a gift, a deed of kindness, running an errand or something else. The list of possibilities is endless. The only goal is to bless someone else and be content to remain in the shadows.

This is a very powerful spiritual practice because when we do some secret good for someone else our pride will scream for attention. Pride wants to be recognized. We want our approval ratings to go up. We want to slip mention of our good deed into a conversation hoping that someone will ask us more about what we did. Herein lies the power of this discipline. When we practice the discipline of secrecy we intentionally choose to silence the voice of pride. We choose to step out of the spotlight unnoticed.

### Silencing pride

When this discipline is practiced wisely, the act of secrecy can train our heart to long for the applause of God, rather than the applause of others. This practice is not so much for those on the receiving end of the kindness, though they are definitely blessed. Rather, this discipline is for the good of our own souls. We come to realize that we do not have to be recognized for everything we do. Some things can be between just God and me. No one else has to know. We can learn to take delight in bringing a smile to God's face. We are released from being concerned about what others think of us.

Yet there is a dark side to practicing this discipline. Pride can quickly taint the experience. An act of secret servanthood can begin with noble intentions but it can quickly morph into an act of self-advancement.

Consider this personal experience. As a kid I loved shoveling snow. It was like my spiritual gift. I delighted in making sure that every square inch of our sidewalk was officially snow free. We had a few elderly neighbors on our street. So when it snowed, I would shovel our sidewalk, and then I would keep on clearing snow right on down the street. I enjoyed clearing all the neighbors' sidewalks and driveways. I would usually shovel after dark or early in the morning before the school bus arrived. It became like a little game for me as I tried to see how fast I could clear their snow before anyone noticed.

### Everything changed

But one day, as I was shoveling, one of our neighbors came out of his house and gave me some money for my efforts. At that moment everything changed. From then on, instead of secretly trying to get the snow cleared as fast as I could, I started scraping our metal shovel a little harder against the cement. The more noise, the better. I found myself spending more time shoveling in front of windows and under the streetlights.

I wanted to get noticed. I wanted wallets to get opened on my behalf. Little did I know that my inner voice of pride was no longer silent. I could get applause. Others would think well of me, just a kid! Plus, I'd get a little spending money on the side. Unfortunately this was no longer an act of servanthood and worship. Snow shoveling had become all about me. I needed the applause.

Dallas Willard writes that when we practice the discipline of secrecy rightly it "enables us to place our public relations department

entirely in God's hands... We allow him to decide when our deeds will be known and when our light will be noticed."

When we secretly serve others the experience will often expose what is really in our souls: Do I have a burning need to get noticed? Or can I simply leave that up to God? There is always the temptation to serve others because the spotlight could shine in our direction and others will applaud.

This particular discipline has been practiced by scores of Christ-followers because it trains the heart in humble servanthood and generosity. It shapes us into people that are satisfied to live for an audience of one. Go ahead and try this discipline. Just don't tell anybody!

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