

# When Silence Becomes a Weapon

Why the “silent treatment” isn’t a boundary, and what it’s really masking

[Jonathan McLernon](#)

Jun 22



The silent treatment.

Some call it “peace”. Or, “keeping the peace”.

Some call it protection. “Holding my peace”.

Some even call it holiness.

But let’s call it what it often is: **punishment**.

The silent treatment has been dressed up in spiritual language.

Labeled a “boundary.”

Dressed up in words of righteousness.

But make no mistake, more often than not, the silent treatment is not about preserving peace.

It’s about *preserving power*.

And for those on the receiving end?

It can be one of the most painful kinds of rejection there is.

## **Boundaries vs Silent Treatment**

Let’s be clear: There ARE times when it is appropriate and even necessary to not engage with someone.

Boundaries are a crucial part of any healthy relationship.

Boundaries help us preserve our mental, emotional and physical energy and avoid falling into the trap of “setting ourselves on fire to keep others warm”.

The silent treatment, on the other hand is callous and dismissive.

It dehumanizes and demeans, saying “You’re not worthy of engagement, so now I pretend that you don’t exist”.

Boundaries, they’re rooted in clarity. The silent treatment in self-righteousness.

---

## **Where It Gets Toxic**

Toxic. I have to admit, I really don’t like that word.

I believe it has been unfairly weaponized to avoid crucial conversations, and actually can filter into the silent treatment.

Nonetheless, I will put aside my squeamish dislike of the word to try and use it judiciously.

The silent treatment shows up in all kinds of relationships from marriage and romantic to friendships, and workplaces.

Where it's even worse and more painful? Tight-knit religious communities.

Here, the silent treatment doesn't just say "*you're wrong*".

It suggests "*You're dangerous to my salvation*" (and thus, must be shut out).

Often, in a religious community, we're taught that disagreement equals wrong, or contamination.

Because... Unity of the spirit, right? Conformity is NOT righteousness.

But, when someone comes along that threatens conformity, it can be conflated as threatening unity, and now, that person must be ostracized.

So members of the community that once embraced and welcomed the "dissident", now pretend they no longer exist.

Thus stating that any grievance they might have is illegitimate and not worthy of hearing.

And this kind of silent treatment gets dressed up as "obedience to the spirit" or "standing firm" or... the one that grates on me the most: "*Protecting my peace*".

---

### **What's Underneath The Silence?**

I believe that there is two significant undercurrents beneath the silent treatment:

- 1. A sense of moral superiority.**

*I'm right. You're wrong. You don't get a voice until you agree with me.*

- 2. A fear of "losing out":**

*You're a problem. You threaten my salvation with your grievance.*

It's often rooted in the fear of "If I engage with you, I might lose out too".

But for those on the receiving end, it's crushing. Heart-breaking. Dehumanizing.

Someone's fear that your doubts might reveal their prison. So they retreat. In silence.

---

### **The Green Monster**

Envy. This one's a tough pill to swallow.

When someone is already feeling conflicted and threatened, and then sees another person enjoying a sense of freedom they can only wish to have... it stirs up a nasty emotion.

When someone refuses to be bound by arbitrary rules in a faith community, they gain a sense of freedom. They might even experience joy.

And for the person who is trapped, this is gut-wrenching to watch. “Why am I doing everything right, and they have all the joy??”

Someone’s peace making us painfully aware of our lack thereof.

---

### **If You’ve Received The Silent Treatment**

Let me say this:

You are not too sensitive.

You’re not being dramatic.

You’re responding to something *real*.

Being ignored by someone you love, or once trusted, is a deep relational wound. It feels like being stabbed in the gut.

Especially when the silence is wrapped in religious language, or cloaked in passive spirituality. The sneering self-righteousness is particularly stomach churning.

The silent treatment doesn’t just isolate, but creates **confusion**. In our human condition, when something is wrong, we want to make it right.

Close the loop. And the silent treatment denies us closure. It’s a punishment for our “unfaithfulness”.

And it takes time to heal from that.

But we can ask God to help us leave that sorrow with him.

---

### **If You’ve Used Silence As Protection**

I want to remove shame. If you’re reading this, perhaps you’ve done this to another person because of where you were at emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

Sometimes we don’t have the capacity to engage.

Sometimes silence really is survival, because the emotions are too big for the moment.

But if we’re honest, there’s a line.

And if silence becomes our go-to move when we’re triggered, uncomfortable, or challenged... We’re no longer protecting ourselves.

We’re **avoiding growth**.

You can step away. You can breathe. You can pause.

But speak that clearly.

Name your need.

Don’t pretend silence is virtue when it’s just avoidance in disguise.

Maybe I can use myself as an example here.

Early on in my marriage, when I became overwhelmed with emotion, I would resort to the silent treatment.

I would clam up and stop engaging. Refuse to talk, because I was fighting to keep all those feelings under control and repressed.

It was really a reflection of my fear, and my sense of losing control.

My wife needed to talk or she felt like she'd explode with it all bottled up.

I needed space to breathe or I felt like I'd explode under the pressure.

When we finally communicated our needs clearly, we were became able to mediate our conflicts in a much healthier way.

I could ask for time, as long as I agreed to come back to the discussion in a healthier state, so my wife knew she wouldn't have to hold onto it and churn forever.

Boundaries come with clarity and communication.