

Lessons in Prayer

Mark 1:35-38 ³⁵ Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and those who were with Him searched for Him. ³⁷ When they found Him, they said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You." ³⁸ But He said to them, "Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth."

Years ago, an experiment was done with mice, according to Dallas Willard, a Christian philosopher. In the experiment, mice were given amphetamines. What they were looking to see was the difference between giving a mouse the drug when by itself, as opposed to giving it to mice in a group. Here's what they found: When the mice were together, they needed a very small dose to get them into a hyperactive state. The mice hyped each other up until, with the activity, they killed each other. In fact, placing a mouse without the drug into a group of mice with the drug usually got that mouse so hyped up that it died within 10 minutes. On the other hand, when a mouse was by itself, it took many times the dosage to get anywhere near the same effect. A mouse in solitude was a much tougher customer.

Humans are not that different. Keep us continually in groups, with no solitude, no time alone, and the pressures, stresses, anxieties and frustrations of everyone else become our own. But take that person apart, let him be by himself, and he becomes a lot more resistant to all those influences.

That's true of all people, but for the Christian it is even more so. If you have believed that Jesus Christ is your Saviour from sin, then you have been changed. You have been given a new nature. And as plants by nature need sunshine to survive, so you by nature need exposure to God, by yourself, if you are to be healthy.

The ultimate example of this is the Person we might think was the last one who needed to pray – Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus placed Himself before the Father in prayer, basking in the sunlight of communion. And if we are to be like Christ, become like Christ, we must grow in the school of private prayer.

In this short text, we learn about our Lord's approach to prayer. By observing His example, we can learn three vital lessons about prayer.

I. Jesus Was Determined to Pray

Mark 1:35 ³⁵ Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.

Don't make the mistake of forgetting what came before this. In verse 35, we have the description of one day in Capernaum. If you remember, Mark took us through a day in the life of Messiah. From the morning to the evening, we saw the unrelenting busyness of Jesus' life. In the morning, He was preaching in the synagogue. While preaching, He was interrupted by a demon-possessed man. He cast out the demon. He went home with Peter, expecting a Sabbath-day meal, only to find Peter's mother-in-law dangerously ill. He healed her. And when the sun set, and the Sabbath was over, the whole town of Capernaum gathered at the door, bringing their sick, their maimed, their possessed, their afflicted to Him. No doubt for hours into the night, He healed, and cast out demons. There was no hint that He turned anyone away. According to the Gospel of Luke, He laid hands on them all.

Person after person, case after case, every person telling Jesus of their pain, looking to Him to solve it, and Him relying on the Holy Spirit and the will of the Father to heal and do miracle after miracle. How tired do you think He was when the last person left that house? Remember, this is Jesus, the

Son of Man. He was the God-Man. But His deity and His humanity did not mix, or dilute each other. When we think of His humanity, a body that could ache and be exhausted, it is not as if He had His deity secretly propping Him up. No, when He felt pain, or fatigue, or exhaustion according to His human nature, He felt it, with all the force we feel it. I think we could say that He would have been close to collapsing that night and if there was any morning we might expect Jesus to sleep in, and postpone prayer, it was this one. But instead, what do we find?

Mark 1:35-38 ³⁵ *Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.*

The expression here in the original language is quite remarkable. It means, while still dark, very early, he got up. The one word was used to refer to the fourth watch of the night, which referred to the time between 3am and 6am.

Given how tired Jesus would have been; given how little sleep He would have had, He could only have done this if He was deeply determined to pray. Jesus had set such a high price on prayer, that even if the previous night had eaten into the sleep He needed, He was still going to rise to make sure prayer happened.

Now when you think about your own life, you have no doubt done the same when there was something you were determined to do. Sometimes, there has been an exam you have had to write. You study late into the night, and then you set your alarm for a good two hours before you have to leave, and you wake up and study more. Perhaps you have been on a drive to lose weight or get healthier or excel at a sport. You get up much earlier than you need to, so that you can get to the gym or do the jog and still be in time for work or college. Perhaps you have had a meeting, or an interview that meant you had to be in your car at four o'clock, or at the airport by five. Did you do it? Yes. You did it because you placed enough value on that meeting, or making that appointment, or doing well in the exam, or being healthy.

It was not that you went on a self-discipline course to do those things. When something is valuable enough to you, your desire for it conquers your desire for more sleep. Discipline comes from having a strong desire to accomplish something. Anything that you desire strongly enough will cause you to cut out other things, whip other things into shape, deny yourself other things.

Here our Lord does that when it comes to prayer. Apparently, if there was one thing He could not do without, it was prayer. Jesus felt towards prayer what you have felt about that exam, that appointment, that interview, that job.

The point is not that you have to get up at four 'o clock every morning to pray. The point is, you have been able to get up that early, when you were determined to do something. Jesus had that kind of determination when it came to prayer.

What was it about prayer that Jesus the Son of God felt He needed so much? He once put it this way, *"My food is to do the will of Him who sent me"* (John 4:34). Jesus' life was focused on doing what the Father had sent Him to do. He wanted to please the Father. He wanted to do the works of the Father. He wanted to speak the words of the Father. He wanted to reveal the Father. And where did Jesus fill His soul with the will of the Father, with the words of the Father, with the works of the Father? In prayer. Prayer was not simply a time to present His Father with a list of needs. Prayer was a time of communion for Jesus. He said in John 15 that it was His habit to abide in the Father's love. He always lived in the Father's presence, but prayer became a focused, uninterrupted, undistracted time of communion with God.

This was where so much of His power came from. On one occasion, Jesus' disciples could not cast out a demon. When Jesus came, He cast it out. They asked Him why they were not able to. His answer was not, Because I am the Son of God and you are not. His answer was:

Mark 9:28-29 ²⁸ *And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?"* ²⁹ *So He said to them, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting."*

The implication that Jesus is making is that the disciples did not pray like He did.

If this is what prayer was for the Son of God, is it any different for us who have been adopted to be children of God? If He felt that this was the source of power, and where He had to go to face the day, is it not the same for us?

It seems that Jesus viewed prayer differently to us. He was tired, but saw prayer as vital before another busy day. We too often feel tired, and see prayer as another thing which will tire us out. Perhaps we have misunderstood it altogether. Perhaps prayer is exactly what will give us strength to face the day. Perhaps it is our prayerless days in which we are far more frazzled, harried, distracted and frustrated. Because if you have been given Christ's nature, the power source of which is communion with the Father, to miss that is to lean on the arm of the flesh for your day.

Jesus was determined to pray. He wanted and needed and desired uninterrupted communion with God. That leads us to the second thing we observe about Jesus' prayer:

II. Jesus Wanted No Distractions in Prayer

³⁵ *Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.*

Jesus did two things that could virtually assure him of being undistracted – he chose a particular time and a particular place. By rising early, he could slip out while others were sleeping. By rising early, no one would be talking to him, needing him, or otherwise interrupting him. By going out to a solitary place, he guaranteed the same thing. A solitary place lacks two things – other people and interesting things to distract you while you try to pray.

Not only was Jesus determined to pray, He set about arranging His circumstances so that when He did pray, it would be fruitful.

Why did Jesus seek such undistracted prayer? Jesus knew what each of us have discovered in practice: minds wander when we pray. Prayer is an act of faith: we treat the invisible as visible, we treat the future as present. But for physical people, who like to see and hear and taste and touch and feel, it is difficult. When we sit down to pray and try to speak to God, whom we do not see, we are assaulted by noises. We close our eyes so that we will not be distracted by what we see. We are distracted by thoughts and memories, and thoughts of what the day holds, and what we have to do, and how much time we have before we have to leave.

Jesus took action to make sure that when He did pray, He had enough time, and enough space to be effective in prayer.

This was Jesus' habit. We read in **Mark 6:46** *And when He had sent them away, He departed to the mountain to pray.*

In the 21st century, has being undistracted in prayer gotten easier or harder? The world has made it normal to live with continual noise – the background noise of the car radio; the ongoing noise of the TV, and the endless digital noise. It's a symptom of distracted minds when we get edgy if we haven't checked our Facebook profile or looked at emails, or looked at any updates to our favourite blogs

We don't realise what's happening to us. Our minds are becoming filled with short spurts of information, spasms of words that are tweeted or BBMed. The effect is to make us people whose thoughts are scattered and weightless; whose attention is divided hundreds of ways every day; whose concentration shrinks to scanning the first few words of a Google search; whose interest and attention is tossed to and fro but whatever is new and updated and incoming, and who become impatient with extended attention on one thing.

If you are sceptical, let me encourage you to do a test. Take a fast of online activity, and background noise. Choose to only read for a week. You might find how restless and uncomfortable you become in following one train of thought by one author for an extended period.

But if we lose this ability, how can we ever pray? Even if we have dead silence and close our eyes, our own restless minds will destroy our prayer lives, longing for something new, an update, something new in the inbox. Dear friends, take care. If your eye offends you, pluck it out. If your media habits are destroying your ability to sit and think, to sit and talk to God for half an hour or an hour, then you decide what must go.

Tozer said, "Retire from the world each day to some private spot, even if it be only the bedroom (for a while I retreated to the furnace room for want of a better place). Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart and a sense of God's presence envelops you. Deliberately tune out the unpleasant sounds and come out of your closet determined not to hear them. Listen for the inward Voice till you learn to recognize it."

Jesus took action to avoid distractions. We need to do the same. I do not say that you must rise at 4 every morning to pray. The Bible does not command that. I do not say you must get to an absolutely secluded space to pray. The Bible does not command that. Simply the example of Jesus shows us that He arranged circumstances so that He would not be distracted.

For some of you, that might mean you can do something very similar to what Jesus did. For some of you, it will mean carving out a space and time. It might mean teaching your children when your quiet time is, and not allowing distractions. It might mean using nap time. It might mean a lunch break in your car. It will definitely mean not being conformed to this world in how they use their smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, and other such things.

The point of this text is not to lay on us some burden about what time we get up in the morning. The point is to show us the example of Jesus in intelligently arranging His circumstances so as to be undistracted in prayer.

Our Lord was determined to pray. He was so determined to pray that He made sure He would not be distracted in prayer. And we see some of the fruit of that.

III. Jesus Was Directed By Prayer

Mark 1:36-38 ³⁶ And Simon and those who were with Him searched for Him. ³⁷ When they found Him, they said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You." ³⁸ But He said to them, "Let us go into the next towns, that I may

preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth."

When Simon and the other three disciples woke up, you can be sure that the first thing they noticed was that Jesus was gone. When the rest of the town woke up, they would have made for Simon's house. They wanted to hear him teach again, see him, perhaps thank him.

When they find out that Jesus is missing, there was a fair amount of commotion. Simon and the others begin searching for Jesus. The word 'searched' in verse 36 carries the idea of hunting, even questing. Jesus was the prized personality and He had to be found.

When they finally find Him, you can almost sense that they are exasperated, irritated – everyone is looking for You! What are you doing here all by Yourself? You're needed. You're in demand. This is no way to act after a day like yesterday. You need to be where everyone wants You to be!

The expected response from Jesus might be – “OK, I'm coming.” But what do we find? Instead, Jesus' response was to say, “Let us go to the other villages, that I may preach there also, for I came forth for this reason”.

Jesus rises from prayer, and is not in the slightest bit swayed by what people tell Him to do. Even though 'everyone' is looking for Him, He is deeply aware of His purpose. His time in prayer causes Him to face the day not pushed to and fro by the world's demands, not blown about by what others think is urgent, but with a resolute determination to do the Father's will.

In praying, He rises with the Father's direction. Jesus was directed by prayer. There is a prophecy that this is what Messiah would receive from God every day.

Isaiah 50:4-5 ⁴ "The Lord GOD has given Me The tongue of the learned, That I should know how to speak A word in season to him who is weary. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear To hear as the learned. ⁵ The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not rebellious, Nor did I turn away.

When Jesus spoke about His own ministry, He kept telling people that He received His direction, His message, His words from the Father.

John 5:19 ¹⁹ Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.

John 5:30 ³⁰ "I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.

John 8:28-29 Then Jesus said to them, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things.

John 8:38 ³⁸ "I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father."

John 12:49-50 ⁴⁹ "For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. ⁵⁰ "And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak."

You see, Jesus rose from prayer committed to His mission from the Father. Yes, He was a hero in Capernaum from His activities of the day before, but He did not come to be applauded as a miracle-worker. His goal was to preach – to declare Himself to be Messiah and God in the flesh, that men should believe in Him. He knew the other towns in Galilee needed to hear it.

Jesus communed with the Father, not because it was one more task to do, one more chore to tick off,

but because it was the task that gave Him direction and strength and focus for all the tasks ahead of Him. He knew that every day He would be mobbed by people wanting Him, and He needed the Father's clear direction for what he was to do that day.

When you have been so busy that you did not have time to pray, did you find that on that day you used your time better? On the other hand, when you have found time to pray, have you not noticed how your priorities come into focus; how you tend to be better directed, more able to say no to the trivial, more able to accomplish what is most important?

A book came out a few years ago called "Too Busy Not to Pray" That is much like the attitude of Martin Luther. He said "If I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the devil gets the victory through the day. I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer."

Now you do not have Martin Luther's life, so the point is not that you have to spend three hours in prayer. The point is, if Jesus, and His most effective servants have seen their busyness as the very reason to pray more, we cannot allow busyness as an excuse to not pray. Prayer will in fact clarify, concentrate and maximise your energies towards what God wants you to do.

It is when we pray that we arise with a better sense of how to approach that person at work with whom we'd like to start a Bible study. We go into the day with a better sense of what is really important in our children's lives. We are more aware of conversations that can be used to point people to God. We are better able to say no to things that will distract and drain. We tend to not waste time frittering away on the Internet. We become more people-focused, thinking not just about things to do, but whom to bless. We end up being more ministry-minded, and more evangelistically in tune. We notice our sins more, and are more determined to put them off and embrace cleansing and change in Christ.

In His last prayer, Jesus said this to the Father:

John 17:4 ⁴ *"I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.*

How do you think He managed to finish the work the Father gave Him to do in three and a half years? Part of the reason was His determination to pray, and receive direction from the Father each day.

Philippians 2:5 *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,*

Jesus needed to pray – and so do you. Jesus so needed direction and refreshment from communing with the Father that He was singlemindedly determined to do it. So He made sure that He was undistracted and had enough space and time to do so.

The Spirit of God indwells you Christ, enabling you to be like Christ. If you want to, you can, by His empowerment be determined to pray, be undistracted in prayer, and gain direction from prayer.