

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Epiphany 5, Series B
Saturday, February 6th, 2021
Sunday, February 7th, 2021

Sermon: Life in Prayer

Text: Mark 1:29-39

Focus: Jesus found rest in prayer to the Father.

Function: That they would seek out lonely places to pray and enter into relationship with God.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: “This means that I should be certain that these petitions are pleasing to our Father in heaven, and are heard by Him; for He Himself has commanded us to pray in this way and has promised to hear us...” (SC, Conclusion of the Lord’s Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. In our Gospel reading today we hear of Jesus that “rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35, ESV).¹ Early in the morning—likely between three o’clock and six o’clock—Jesus got up in the cold and dark and found “a desolate place,” a lonely place—a quiet place—to pray. The same Greek word (ἐρημος, *erēmos*) can also mean “desert” or “wilderness” (cf. 1:12-13).

That Jesus would rise so early to go and pray is astounding. On a human level, we wonder how our Lord found the strength to pray after a hard day’s night full of work. In the verses immediately prior to this, we hear that “that evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons” (v. 32). And Jesus healed them. I do not imagine this was a quick affair. Mark tells us that “the whole city was gathered together at the door” (v. 33). And from other reports of healing, we know that Jesus never just snapped his fingers and sent people on their way. Love and mercy take time. Jesus likely spent hours, not minutes, in his

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

mission of mercy. Pining for his pillow, he must have gone to bed physically exhausted—and perhaps emotionally as well, as I cannot imagine that the poor plight of his people left him unmoved or unaffected.

Nevertheless, after all of that, Jesus rose up early to pray before the sun even sent forth its first rays above the horizon. Why did he do it? Jesus knew that his whole life and ministry depended upon his relationship with the Father. Jesus' ministry was born out of his prayer life. His regular habit was to “withdraw to desolate places to pray” (Luke 5:16). Jesus craved connection with his Father. He knew that without prayer, he would not have the power to carry out his mission. As Jesus says in John's Gospel: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” (John 5:19).

We may wonder why Jesus needed to pray at all. After all, is he not the divine Son of God? I have heard others joke, “So when Jesus prayed, was he talking to *himself*?!”

That is the wrong question. First of all, it reflects a misunderstanding of the inner workings of the Holy Trinity. For, as we learn in the Creed, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father. The Father is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father. The Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Son. Yet God is one. We cannot comprehend the relationships between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are distinct Persons yet remain One.

The other problem with this question is that it ignores Jesus' *humanity*. Yes, he is the Son of God, but he is also the Son of Man, the Word made flesh and come to us in human frailty. Jesus was human as we are—but without sin. His body needed food and drink. He needed

shelter from the cold. He needed rest and sleep. And in his humiliation, he hid his glory beneath his humanity and became wholly dependent upon God for his strength and life.

So the *proper* question to ask about Jesus' prayer life is this: If Jesus, the Son of God, needed to pray, then why do we regard ourselves as exempt from this same need?

How often do we wake to our blaring alarm and then blaze through our day without taking time to pray? We have a to-do list that is a mile long, yet somehow, prayer doesn't make it onto the list or it's far too near the bottom.

I have learned that if I start my day with an early morning meeting or by checking my e-mail, then my time of prayer usually never happens. If I let other things get in the way and put it off, then the rest of the day quickly crowds out my quiet time. It has to be first thing or not at all. In fact, I am ashamed to say, other than a few routine prayers, I didn't do any devotions this past Monday.

Martin Luther famously said, "I have so much to do today that I must begin the day in three hours of prayer." We might chortle and say, "C'mon, Luther! How unrealistic! Don't you know how busy I am? Don't you realize what life is like in a fast-paced, technology-driven world? I have work to do, meetings to be had, chores to finish, e-mails to write, and phone calls to make." Yes, we are all busy—too busy. And we probably need to cut down on our responsibilities, set proper boundaries, and learn to say "no" to people—just like Jesus did when "everyone" was looking for him (v. 38).

But Luther was busy too. He preached daily at the Castle Church in Wittenberg. He taught theology classes at the university. He wrote hundreds of books and pamphlets. He kept up an enormous amount of correspondence, responding to letters from professors, pastors, lay people, nobles, and kings throughout Europe. And on top of all that, he had a wife to please and

seven children to care for. I am willing to bet that, even with our hurried, on-demand culture, Luther was probably busier than you or I. Yet he began his day in prayer—just like our Lord Jesus.

We need prayer more than we do sleep—more even than water, food, or oxygen. And if we are going to pray, it is best to set aside a regular hour and place. Of course, the Bible says, “Pray without ceasing!” (1 Thess. 5:17). And in time of great need or joy, any place and any time is good to pray. But ordinarily, it is necessary for prayer that we cut ourselves off from distraction so we can focus on what we say and feel in our hearts. Shut the door. Turn off your TV or computer. Put your phone in a different room. Ask your spouse to deal with the kids so you can pray. Then offer to do the same for them.

If you are a person who wakes up and lies in bed checking Facebook for 15-20 minutes before you actually get up, use that time to pray instead. Perhaps you can pray in the shower (you’ll know you prayed long enough when the hot water runs out!). Use your lunch break to go sit in a park to eat and pray. Jesus says: “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6). Yet wherever and whenever you carve out that place and time for prayer, make sure you keep it consistent so you don’t forget or put it off.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked his disciples, “Could you not keep watch with me one hour?” (Matt. 26:40). One hour, Lord? Sometimes God is lucky just to get 15 minutes out of me.

Martin Luther’s barber once wrote to ask Luther how to pray. In his reply Luther began by focusing on the necessity of prayer.

“We must see to it that we do not lose the habit of prayer and deceive ourselves into thinking that other kinds of things are more important, when they are not. Then we might

become careless and lazy, cold and indifferent when it comes to praying. The devil is neither lazy or lax in our midst” (Letter to Peter Barber, 1535).

In other words, if we are honest with ourselves, no matter how many things we have to do, we are really too busy *not* to pray.

As Christians, we pray for two reasons: first, God command it; and second, God attaches great promises to prayer. God promises to listen to our prayers (cf. Ps. 6:9; 40:1). He is not distracted or too busy as we pretend that we are. I’m sure that you have had the frustration of trying to have a meaningful conversation with a friend or your spouse or kids, but they’re so glued to the TV or their smartphone that you can’t get their attention. Not so with God! He *always* has time for you and always listens. In fact, God says, “Before [you] call I will answer; while [you] are yet speaking I will hear” (Isa. 65:24). When you pray, the Lord gives you his full attention. Plus, Jesus tells us that whatever we ask of the Father in his name, God will grant us (John 15:16; 16:23).

Why does God listen to our prayers? Because our heavenly Father is pleased with Jesus the Son, who pleads for us on our behalf (cf. Luke 23:34; Rom. 8:34). When Jesus died on the cross, the temple curtain tore in two, forever granting us favor and access to God’s presence. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

The Lord is waiting for you. When will you pray? Where will you seek the Father’s face? “And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, [Jesus] departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.