

JESUS: AN EXAMPLE OF PRAYER

Luke 3:21-22; 5:16; 6:12-13; 9:18; 9:28-29; 11:1-2; 22:39-46

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Prayer. When it comes to preaching on prayer, I find the task difficult and disturbing. Difficult not due to a shortage of passages in Scripture, but difficult due to a shortage of practice in my personal life. Disturbing because few other subjects convict me as does prayer. I confess: I do not pray enough. We learn about prayer by studying Scripture, and we learn about prayer by praying. To study but fail to pray is indifference. To pray but fail to study is ignorance.

In today's evangelical world, much is said and written about prayer. And a great deal of what is preached and penned strikes me as simplistic, superstitious, and success-oriented. Far too often, we are offered a magical formula which, when repeated rightly and regularly, guarantees us a blessing. This sounds to me a whole lot like the miserable advice given to Job by his friends who thought they were helping.

I apologize if I sound sour on the subject of prayer. That is not my intent. My intent is to share with you what is an intense inward struggle for me; and that is, my distaste for much of what is said about prayer discourages me from praying. I need to pray, and so the five sermons I plan to preach on prayer are for me. I hope that as we struggle and study together that we will not only better understand prayer, but that we will pray more.

Allow me to begin by sharing with you three personal observations. I must warn you: my observations are contrary to popular perspectives on prayer. *First, prayer should seek consecration rather than confirmation.* Someone has said, "What we usually pray to God is not that His will be done, but that He approve ours."¹ In prayer, we seek to consecrate ourselves to the will of God rather than seek from God confirmation of our will. The

¹Helga Bergold Gross.

question is *not*, “Will God bless what I do?” The question is, “Will I do what God blesses?” *Second, prayer should be relationship-motivated rather than result-motivated.* Prayer is not about getting what we want; it is about becoming what God wants. The question is *not*, “What do I get through prayer?” The question is, “What do I become through prayer?” *Third, prayer should strive to be persistent rather than proficient.* When it comes to praying, the need for proficiency is nothing as compared with the necessity of persistence. The question is *not*, “How do I pray the right way?” The question is, “How do I pray every day?”

Luke, the author of a Gospel that bears his name and the author of the Book of Acts, has been appropriately called “the evangelist of prayer.”² While the other evangelists mention prayer, none of them develop the concept as fully as Luke does. The Gospel of Luke opens and closes and the Book of Acts opens with references to prayer (Luke 1:10; 24:53; Acts 1:14). The Gospel sets up Jesus’ life and teaching as a model, while Acts demonstrates how the church and apostles applied the model to their situations.³ *What I want to examine in this sermon is how Luke highlights the prominence of prayer in the ministry of Jesus by emphasizing its role at every critical turning-point.* Whenever Jesus faced a fork in the road, prayer guided Him down the right path. There are seven such scenes.

1. *Luke 3:21-22 (the baptism of Jesus).* Mark reads: “. . . and [Jesus] was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, He saw heaven being torn open . . .” (Mark 1:9-10). Luke rewrote this to: “. . . Jesus was baptized . . . And as He was praying, heaven was opened . . .” Luke is the only Gospel writer to present Jesus as praying during His baptism.

2. *Luke 5:16 (routine prayer).* Following the healing of a leper and immediately before Jesus has His first confrontation with the religious authorities, Mark has: “. . . Jesus . . . stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to Him from

²Greg Sterling, “‘Pray Always’: Prayer in Luke/Acts,” in D. Fleer and D. Bland, eds., *Preaching from Luke/Acts*, Rochester College Lectures on Preaching (ACU Press, 2002), 67.

³Kyu Sam Han, “Theology of Prayer in the Gospel of Luke,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (December 2000): 675-676, fn. 8.

everywhere” (Mark 1:45). Luke changed this to: “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”

3. *Luke 6:12-13 (the choosing of the Twelve)*. Mark simply says, “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to Him those He wanted . . .” (Mark 3:13). Luke expanded this to: “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, He called His disciples to Him and chose twelve of them . . .”

4. *Luke 9:18 (Peter’s confession)*. This same pattern surfaces prior to Peter’s confession. Mark gives a geographical reference: “Jesus and His disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi” (Mark 8:27). Luke rewrote this to include a reference to prayer: “Once when Jesus was praying in private and His disciples were with Him . . .”

5. *Luke 9:28-29 (the Transfiguration)*. After Peter’s confession, the transfiguration of Jesus occurred. Mark frames the story this way: “After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There He was transfigured before them” (Mark 9:2). Luke revised this to: “About eight days after Jesus said this, He took Peter, John, and James with Him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As He was praying [He was transfigured] . . .”

6. *Luke 11:1-2 (the Lord’s Prayer)*. Matthew introduces the Lord’s Prayer with: “This, then, is how you should pray . . .” (Matt 6:9). Luke provided a setting: “One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When He finished, one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.’ He said to them, ‘When you pray, say . . .’”

7. *Luke 22:39-46 (the Garden of Gethsemane)*. The last of the seven scenes is situated in the Garden of Gethsemane. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all portray a praying Jesus at this crucial hour. Luke’s portrayal, however, is unique in several significant ways. First, note Luke’s subtle suggestions that Jesus prayed often in the Garden. After “the Last Supper”—as we call it—Jesus and His disciples went out to the Mount of Olives. Luke adds the observation, “as was His [Jesus’] custom” (v. 39)—an apparent reference to an established practice. Arriving at Gethsemane, Luke says “He [Jesus] came to *the place*” (v. 40)—an apparent reference to a regularly-visited location. John, in his Gospel, points out that it was easy for Judas to find Jesus since he knew “*the place*, because Jesus

had often met there with His disciples” (John 18:2). Second, for reasons that we will not go into, Luke’s portrayal of Jesus makes no mention of an emotional struggle going on within Jesus. Whereas Matthew and Mark have “He fell on the ground” (Mark 14:35) or “He fell on His face and prayed” (Matt 26:39), Luke has, He “knelt down and prayed” (v. 41). Jesus assumes His normal posture for prayer; He is not distressed. Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke does not indicate that Jesus engaged in multiple prayer sessions. In Luke’s account, Jesus does not ask to have “the cup” removed; He asks for the ability to understand God’s will and for the strength to fulfill God’s will. Jesus seeks guidance in discerning and doing the will of God. Furthermore, in v. 45 it is the disciples—not Jesus—who are pictured as being emotionally weary. Now, I realize that some of you may be wondering, “What about verses 43 and 44?”⁴ Sounds like an emotional battle to me!” Most modern translations either omit these verses or include them but have a footnote stating that these verses are absent from some ancient manuscripts. I do not desire to debate this point. Matthew and Mark powerfully depict the emotional war that Jesus waged in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke, probably due to the audience to which he was writing, chose not to emphasize Jesus’ emotional state.⁵ All three evangelists highlight the centrality of prayer in this event. Third, in connection with Luke’s unique portrayal, he sandwiches the Gethsemane scene between Jesus’ twice-stated warning, “Pray that you [the disciples] do not fall into temptation” (vv. 40, 46).

So, what does all of this data⁶ mean? *According to the Gospel of Luke, prayer has two fundamental functions: it is the antidote to agnosticism and it is the antidote to apostasy.* In other words, the purposes of prayer are (1) to enable us to understand and accept the plan of God that governs salvation history, and (2) to enable us to live lives of faith in a faithless world. Understanding and faithfulness . . . those two words say it all. We pray so that we may discern and do. We pray so that we may see and survive.

⁴“An angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him. And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:43-44).

⁵See Greg Sterling, “*Mors philosophi*: The Death of Jesus in Luke,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94 (October 2001): 383-402.

⁶I realize that “data” is plural. I simply do not like the sound of proper grammar—What do the data mean?

Without prayer, we are ignorant of God's will and we are impotent to do God's will.

Without prayer, we don't know where we're going, and we won't get there!

The late Henri Nouwen, author of more than forty books and one of the great spiritual writers of modern times, penned these words:

Prayer leads you to see new paths and to hear new melodies in the air. Prayer is the breath of your life which gives you freedom to go and to stay where you wish and to find the many signs which point out the way to a new land. Praying is not simply some necessary compartment in the daily schedule of a Christian or a source of support in time of need, nor is it restricted to Sunday mornings or mealtimes. Praying is living. It is eating and drinking, action and rest, teaching and learning, playing and working. Praying pervades every aspect of our lives. It is the unceasing recognition that God is wherever we are, always inviting us to come closer and to celebrate the divine gift of being alive.⁷

As one who lives almost two thousand years after the events narrated by the Gospel-writer Luke, I am thankful for his story of Jesus. His story not only supplied ancient disciples with a means to endure and to understand an uncertain future, it suggests that you and I can persevere and play our part in the unfolding of God's plan. We do so in the same way as our first-century counterparts . . . we get down on our knees.

Father, we praise You because in Your providence You have preserved Luke's story of Your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Help us to set our sights on Jesus as our model for praying. Like Jesus, may we pray to seek Your will and the strength to do it. Father, when the tests and trials of life knock us off our feet, force us to land on our knees. Teach us to pray. Teach us to listen. Through prayer, shape us into faithful children, just as You did with Your Son. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

⁷Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life*, compiled and edited by Wendy Wilson Greer (Crossroad, 1999), 40.