

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Rediscover Jesus: The Praying Lord”

Dr. Jay Howell

September 5, 2021

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Mark 1:35-39

I know you were all grateful, as I was, for Tom Tewell’s teaching us last week. He continued our walk through a couple of early chapters in the Gospel of Mark, a series we’re calling “Rediscover Jesus.” What we’re hoping to do in this series is ask, “What is Jesus showing us about who he is and what it means to follow him?”, because no matter where you are in a life of faith, Jesus is *never* finished showing us something new about him. There’s always a bit of discovery, even rediscovery, when it comes to this man of Nazareth. Normally we’d just pick up where we left off, but you may remember last week Tom’s sermon actually looked at two different passages, both of which showed a bit about Jesus as a healer. This week we’ll look at the few verses that were in between. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage.] This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

You know, if it weren’t for just a few words here, it might be easy to believe that Jesus was just about getting bigger and better, healing more and more people, reaching more and more people. But in just a few words, Jesus reminds us that there’s something else, something even more important going on. Verse 35: “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”

At this point in Jesus’s ministry, Mark seems to be making a point of just how much momentum Jesus was starting to get. Tom noted it a little bit last week. Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law in Capernaum, and the whole city had gathered around the door, standing on their tip-toes, Tom added, trying to see in. Word is starting to spread about this Jesus.

That’s something Mark has been peppering into the story. From the text two weeks ago, Mark adds in verse 28, “At once his fame began to spread through the surrounding region of Galilee.” Then again from last week, verse 34: “And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons.” Yet again from last week, verse 45, “Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.”

There’s even another one at the end of the passage we read today. Verse 39 says, “And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.” It should be pretty clear by this point, and Mark’s not being all that subtle about it: Jesus is a rising star. A lot of people are being healed. Demons are being cast out. The message is being proclaimed, and more and more people are hearing it. All good things.

And then almost as if it were an aside, here in the middle of all this healing and preaching, there comes this short little note that Jesus tries to get away from it all.

But then it's like Mark is making sure we don't miss the point. "In the morning," it says, and just in case we didn't catch that this was before anybody else was awake, "while it was still dark," it says, and just in case we might think, well, it's just a bit of quiet time before others get up for the day, "he got up and went out to a deserted place," it says, and just in case we don't catch just why, "and there he prayed." All that separation, in the morning, while it's still dark, in a deserted place, for Jesus to pray.

At first, it seems kind of innocuous. Oh, Jesus is praying. Well, that's nice. But then you start thinking about it. This is in fact the first time that Mark tells us that Jesus prays, so if this were the first time you had ever heard this story, this whole Gospel, you might ask, "Wait a minute. This Jesus can heal diseases, cast out demons, teach from Scripture. Heck, even at his baptism, a voice came from heaven saying, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' Plus, things are going great. He's doing what he's come to do, and people are responding in droves. He's got all the momentum. Why on earth does he break stride, even for a few hours? What on earth is so important for Jesus to pray about?" But maybe it's precisely when it seems like you have all the momentum that stepping back is all the more important.

Almost 55 years ago, there was a man named Gene Kranz. Maybe you recognize the name. He was a Flight Director for NASA during the Apollo program, setting out to put an American on the moon. He's best known for heading up Mission Control for lunar landing of Apollo 11, and then for doing the same in supporting the troubled Apollo 13 mission.

But a few years before both of those missions, in 1967, NASA had hit a pretty rough stretch. This was the first crewed mission in the Apollo program, Apollo 1, when Kranz was serving as an assistant director. Some of you already know the story, but in a late launch test, a fire broke out in the command module, trapping and killing all three astronauts inside. It was a tragedy in the loss of life and an embarrassment for the American space program. Because if you know much about that period in time, you know that the Apollo program wasn't just about scientific discovery or the spirit of exploration. There was a lot of global politics at play here too. The Russian space program had beaten the Americans in every significant benchmark, putting a satellite into orbit, the first human being into space, first images of the far side of the moon, etc. But John F. Kennedy had set the vision years earlier that America would be the first to put a human being on the moon, so the gauntlet had been thrown down. That meant that for the Apollo program, national pride was all wrapped up in this. Could they catch up with the Russians?

So when the fire on Apollo 1 led to the deaths of three of America's best and brightest, it led those like Gene Kranz to take stock of what happened. On the Monday after the fire, he called together his branch of flight control and said this, "Spaceflight will never tolerate carelessness, incapacity, and neglect. Somewhere, somehow, we screwed up. It could have been in design, build, or test. Whatever it was, we should have caught it. We were too gung-ho about the schedule, and we locked out all of the problems we saw each day in our work. Every element of the program was in trouble and so were we. The simulators were not working, Mission Control was behind in virtually every area, and flight and test procedures changed daily. Nothing we did had any shelf life. Not one of us stood up and said, 'Dang it, stop!'" Except he didn't say "Dang it."

What Kranz was getting at was an entire group of people who had gotten so consumed by whatever goal or momentum they seemed to have that they had lost sight of what they were there to do. They had gotten so caught up in keeping pace that no one said, "Wait a minute, we've gotten way ahead of ourselves." And they

needed a course correction. They needed it over and over again. Because sometimes, it's when everything is pushing you forward that we are most in need of that voice to remind us to step back, to recenter us.

It's not like Jesus was in danger of losing control of the command module, he's showing us something because he makes it a point, especially when things are going well, to wake up in the morning, while it was still dark, and go off to a deserted place to pray. Shows us something about what prayer is supposed to be. Do you pray? I dare say most of the time when we pray, we're usually thinking about asking God to do something, to intervene. Heal my parent. Protect my child. Bring peace to that war-torn country. Things like that. Nothing wrong with that. Countless examples of prayers bringing our burdens before God, not least of all by Jesus himself. Prayers of supplication, they're called. In other words, going to God in prayer when times are tough.

But Jesus is showing us something different here. Times are good. He's riding high, and yet he makes a point of getting away to pray. How hard is that to do? To step away when all the momentum is with you, when things are going great. I mean, imagine it in another setting. Let's say you were running a business, and after years of preparation, things are finally starting to click into gear. Business is up, customers are streaming in, and then you say, "You know, I need to step back for a little bit." How would that go over? Whether it's instinct or ambition or whatever it is, we tend to be wired to press the advantage, to seize the opportunity, to strike while the iron is hot. And if all of a sudden you didn't, folks would look at you funny.

Folks looked at Jesus a little funny too because of this. The disciples search for him, in fact it says they "hunted" for him—kind of odd word choice there—begging him to come back, to get back to work, because everyone was looking for him. "There are opportunities that are being missed!" they must have thought. And Jesus does go back to work, but he goes back to the work he was called to do, not the work the multitudes expected him to do.

You see, Jesus is showing us something, something so crucial about who he is and what it would mean to follow him, and prayer is so central to that. He, even he, this Son of God, uniquely aware of the will of God as it was his own, goes to God in prayer, and made a point of it. And why? To ask God for help when times were tough? Yeah, he would do that plenty of times. But also to show that even when times were going great, it was crucial for him to be in communion with the Father.

I have a confession to make. If there's a list of so-called spiritual disciplines or practices that are staples of a life of faith, prayer's got to be on it, and yet for me it would be one of the worst. Can you believe it? Trust me, it feels weird to say. A pastor saying he's not very strong in prayer. It's not because I don't like praying. It's because when there's a lot happening, like things at the church, or two kids under three at home, or you name it, life happens, right? For me what usually ends up getting cut first is that time in prayer, and it's not right. Because like Gene Kranz noted for the Apollo program, how easy is it to lose sight of what you're doing when you fail to step back and say, "Dang it, stop!"?

Have you ever felt the same way? Have you ever felt so consumed or driven by the task at hand or by the goals ahead of you or by the pressure behind you that you no longer feel a connection to *why* you're doing something? That's even when everything may be going great. That's especially true in a life of faith, and it's not just limited to church stuff. What Jesus is showing us is that it's precisely when everything is going great that we *need* to step back, we *need* to go to the Lord in prayer, not because it's that something vaguely spiritual on the side, but because it centers everything else in what God wants, not what we want. And instead of seeing it as one more thing for us to negotiate on the daily schedule, something that could be cut as convenience would dictate—

which is what I usually do—Jesus is showing us that this time apart with the Lord should be indispensable, because when we don't, we lose sight of what God wants.

One of the most prolific writers in church history was none other than the great reformer Martin Luther. He did a lot, but in his spare time, he also produced 120 written works, including a full German translation of the New Testament in less than three months. His work ethic was legendary, so much so a saying was attributed to him—it's debatable whether he actually said this—but it said, "I have so much business to do today, that I shall not be able to get through it with less than three hours' prayer." Did you hear that? I have so much to do, that I shall not be able to get through it with less than three hours' prayer. See for him, like for Jesus, the act of prayer was so crucial, that it wasn't one more thing to do apart from everything else he had to do. It was something he *had* to do if he even wanted to hope to do everything well and faithfully.

Friends, we've got a lot of busy people. No denying that. It wouldn't surprise me if even now some of your minds may be drifting to everything you've got to get done this afternoon. But what would change about how you saw everything in your life, not just the church stuff, but everything, through the lens that Jesus saw his work? Through the lens of prayer. Through the lens of centering ourselves in what God wants, not what we want. What about your work would change? What about your families would change? What about your faith would change, if that time in prayer was so crucial to you that you would wake up in the morning, so to speak, while it was still dark, and seek out that deserted place to dwell with the Almighty?

That's a question for me as much as it's for everyone else, but I believe what we would find, what we would discover, is that we would find everything in our lives more focused, more content, and most importantly, more in step with the will of God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.