

“THE CHRIST OF THE GARDEN AND PRAYER”

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Lk. 11:1-10

Albert Einstein tells the story of a time when he was asked by a woman to explain his theory of relativity. He answered her question by saying,

“Madam, I was once walking in the country on a hot day with a blind friend and said that I would like a drink of milk. ‘Milk?’ said my friend. ‘Drink I know, but what is milk?’ I replied that it was white liquid. ‘Liquid I know,’ said the man, ‘but what is white?’ I told him white was the color of swan’s feathers. ‘Feathers I know,’ was my friend’s reply. ‘But what is a swan?’ I replied that a swan is a bird with a crooked neck. He said, ‘Neck I know, but what is crooked?’ At that I lost my patience. I seized his arm and straightened it. ‘That’s straight,’ I said. Then I bent it at the elbow. ‘That’s crooked,’ I said. ‘Ah,’ said my blind friend ‘Now I know what you mean by milk!’”

Some things *are* difficult to explain, aren’t they? One of the most taxing is prayer. In spite of the fact that it has been called, “the greatest power on earth,” it is hardly ever used. Primarily because, at best, our wisest explanations are halting and awkward. We simply don’t understand what it is or how it works, with the sad result that, for far too many, the shine has gone out of life because we do not make enough of prayer.

There are two ways we can learn what prayer is and how it works. One is by being told. The other is by observing someone who really knows. And since one picture is worth a thousand words, it is quite obvious the second method is the more simple and satisfactory way.

Someone has said, “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day.” I think all of us would rather observe prayer in practice, than be told about the practice of prayer. And because no one has ever understood prayer, or used it so effectively as Jesus, it was my feeling that this morning we

could not find a better use of our time than to take a close and careful look at “The Christ of The Garden and Prayer” and then try to imitate him.

The first thing we notice when we begin to observe the prayer life of Jesus is that he made no effort to argue or analyze the subject. In exactly the same way as he accepted the existence of God as a foregone conclusion so, too, he accepted prayer as something that did not need to be proved but practiced. And practice it he did.

James Stewart details how Jesus was found praying at all the crises of his career. When his day of destiny dawned and he was summoned by the Holy Spirit to begin his life work we are told in Luke 3:21 that,

“It came to pass that Jesus also being baptized and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy ghost descended.”

There you have Jesus praying about his vocation.

Later on when he had to choose the hard core of manpower around which he was going to build his church we are told that before he selected his disciples,

“He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God” (Lk. 6:12).

There you have Jesus praying for guidance.

And then, when there came a day when the twelve had been baffled by a peculiarly difficult case of demon-possession, they referred it to Jesus. After the evil spirit had been cast out and they asked Jesus, “Why could not we cast it out?” The answer was,

“This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer” (Mk. 9:29).

There you have Jesus praying for strength to do his mighty works.

Later still, when the storm centers which swirled around him began to mount in intensity, and the temptation was very great to desert God’s high call, we are told by Dr. Luke that,

“Being in an agony he prayed” (Lk. 24:44).

There you have Jesus praying against temptation. Sadly, all too often when *we* are tempted we reverse the process. We wilt before the temptation like a candle in the sun, and then, *after* the fact, we agonize in prayer, pleading for forgiveness. How much better if we followed the example of our Lord and agonized in prayer, *in advance*, against temptation!

Finally, there came that hour when nailed to a cross he hung like a purple rag against a darkened sky. As he hung there, naked and bleeding, strength ebbing away, the waves of God’s wrath dashing against his feet, we are told he cried,

“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Lk. 23:46).

And there you have Jesus praying even unto death.

In every crises of his career Jesus turned to prayer. It was the native breath of his soul. The food upon which he fed. The power from which he drew. The well of refreshing at which he was continually renewed.

But prayer was not only something he only practiced in times of crisis. It was, as James Stewart says, “the habitual atmosphere of his daily life.” You only need to leaf through the pages of the Gospels to find proof of that. Again and again we read that while the world was still asleep, “a great while before day,” Jesus rose up and went out into a quiet place to pray.

It’s important to remember it was no easier for Jesus to find a quiet place than it is for us. Actually, it may have been more difficult, for during three and a half years of ceaseless travel he was homeless. Sometimes he was a guest in someone’s home, and you know how confining that can be, because we don’t wish to upset our host’s routine. But, somehow, despite every handicap and difficulty, Jesus found a time and a place to pray.

Sometimes the load of work he had to carry was almost more than he could bear, and yet, though weary of mind and tired of body, Jesus kept his rendezvous with God. To quote Stewart,

“Prayer, you see, was not only an important *part* of his life; it *was* his life. The very breath of his being.”

Moods

Consequently, Jesus was never at the mercy of moods. Oh, he had his change of feelings.

“He was no passionless stoic. He knew joy and sorrow, smiles and tears, ecstasy and weariness, but through it all his heart turned to prayer, like the compass to the north.” And this sustained him.

Busyness

Jesus was not a captive of busyness. Oh, his life was jammed full of things to do. People to heal. Sermons to preach. Places to go. Loads to lift. There were always those who were clamoring for him and his help. And sometimes he toiled into the long hours of the night because he could not, and would not, turn a seeking soul away.

And yet, the longer the day, the greater the load, the harder the task, the more he prayed. And how desperately we need to learn to do that. Even a Stradivarius needs tuning. The more often it is played, the more often it must be tuned. The farther an airplane flies, the greater is its need for service. And the harder we work, the more often we should pray.

In the words of James Stewart,

“The world’s greatest toiler was also the world’s most shining example of the daily, hourly, practice of the presence of God. For him there could be no substitute for prayer.”

And neither can there be for us. However busy our lives may be, we not only can, but we must make time to pray.

Impatience

Still another characteristic of the prayer life of Jesus is that he was never thwarted by impatience.

He never made the mistake we often do of bursting into the presence of God all out of breath saying, “Listen, Lord, your servant speaks.” And then because God doesn’t immediately jump at our beck and call, throw prayer aside as being useless.

No! For Jesus, prayer was a strenuous, serious business that involved the full involvement of his mind and heart and soul. It called for a wrestling with God. And so it must be for us. Not because the loving Father is unwilling to give, but because lackadaisical, half-hearted, willy-nilly praying is worse than useless. It’s only as our headstrong spirits are brought under control, and our breathless impatient wills are taught the wisdom that often only comes through waiting, that we really know *how* to pray, or for *what* to pray.

I for one have lived long enough to be grateful some of my prayers weren’t answered as I wanted them to be. That God, instead of saying either “yes” or “no” said, “Son, let’s wait awhile.” And *now* looking back, I can see that what seemed so appealing *then*, is not appealing now. God had a better way. And, as always, *his* will and his way worked together for *my* good.

How does that little paragraph go? Oh yes.

“He asked for strength that he might achieve,

He was made weak that he might obey.

He asked for health that he might do greater things,

He was given sickness that he might do better things.

He asked for riches that he might be happy,

He was given poverty that he might be wise.

He asked for power that he might have the praise of men,

He was given weakness that he might feel the need of God.

He asked for all things that he might enjoy life,

He was given life that he might enjoy all things.

And so, while he received nothing he asked for, he received everything he hoped for. His prayer was answered, and he was of all men most blessed.”

Finally, the moral difficulties which often impede our prayers, were not an impediment to Jesus. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” he said, “for they shall see God.” And, being purity personified, Jesus enjoyed that blessing.

You know as well as I, dear friend, that our moments of communion with the Father become few and far between when there is a sense of unconfessed sin in our heart. That doesn’t mean we must be perfect. But it does mean we must be absolutely honest with ourselves, and with God, by continually confessing to him, and admitting to ourselves, those sins which “so easily beset us.”

A few weeks ago a very fine laymen stopped by to see me. He was disturbed because he wasn’t getting anything out of prayer, and wanted to know why. After we had chatted for a while, he said, “Pastor, there are a few things I just have to get off my mind.” And he started in. It wasn’t very attractive stuff, but he told it without mincing any words. As he did, my admiration for him mounted. I have a lot of respect for a man who has guts enough to be honest and is willing to come clean with himself and God.

When he finished he said, “What do you think of me now?” I said, “Friend, I *liked* you before, but now I love you! Besides, it doesn’t matter what *I* think, but what *God* thinks is really important. So as a pastor, as the loving Father’s ordained channel of communication, let me give you *Christ*’s word of reconciliation, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.’” I saw that chap the other day and there was a radiance about him that was contagious. His face almost glowed as he said, “John, since I unburdened myself and received God’s word of reconciliation, prayer has become a force instead of a farce. God and I are closer than we’ve ever been before.”

Indeed, a sense of unconfessed sin can be a hindrance to answered prayer. Clearly, however, that was not a problem for Jesus. Tempted in all points like us, he kept his soul free from the faintest shadow of sin. And, being pure in heart, it was inevitable that he should see God. Have you seen him lately?