

The Secret Prayer of Jesus

A Sermon on Mark 1:35-39

Preached by Paul Liberati, March 14, 2021

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

Although our passage for this morning is very short, in fact it contains a total of five verses, it is rich and full of meaning; it is overflowing with comfort, encouragement, and practical wisdom for our lives. And so, as we approach this text, we need to ask the Lord to open our hearts to the lesson that He has for us today.

Now, as we normally do, we want to pay careful attention to the details that Mark gives us about the context. In verse 35, he provides us with another reference to the *timing of this event*. A few weeks ago, we saw that everything from verses 21-34 took place all in a single day. In verse 21, Jesus came into Capernaum and *entered into the synagogue to teach*, and it was on that occasion that he casted out the unclean spirit from the man who was there. In verse 29, Mark continues the story with Jesus *coming out of the synagogue* and entering into the home of Simon and Andrew. It was there that he healed Simon's mother in law from a great fever. Again, in verse 32, Mark continues with the same story of the same day by telling us that *when it was evening and the sun had gone down*, the whole city brought their loved ones to Jesus to be healed of their sicknesses and their diseases.

And so really what we've seen is that, from sun-up to sun down (and well-beyond), Jesus was engaged in the non-stop work of his ministry—in teaching, healing, and even casting out demons. So, the very fact that Mark provides us with all the little details about where and when these things took place, tells us that there's something that he wants us to see. And that is, *the tireless and sacrificial love of Jesus Christ*. Jesus is pouring himself out for his people. He never turns anyone away who comes (or is brought) to him, but makes

himself available every single time. Here we have a picture of his absolute commitment to the work that his Father gave him to do. And it helps us appreciate the statement he makes in Mark 10:45 when he says, “*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*”

Well now in verse 35 we find the *secret* to the Lord’s tireless ministry, and that secret is that Jesus was, first and foremost, *a man devoted to prayer*. Mark says that after a long day, Jesus got some rest. But instead of crashing out and sleeping in till 10:00 am, he rose up early in the morning—Mark says *long before the sun came up*—and he went to a solitary place and there he prayed. In other words, Jesus just came off a busy day and he knew that he had another busy day ahead. So what did he do? He gave himself to a time of private, uninterrupted prayer.

You see Congregation, Jesus understood something that you and I need to understand as well. And that is that busyness is no excuse not to pray. Rather busyness only increases our need for prayer. I was reading an article this week and the title was very insightful: “*Too busy not to pray.*” Many of us know that famous statement that Martin Luther made to show that the busier we are—and the more work that we have to do—the more time we should spend in prayer. He says: “*Work, work, from morning until late at night. In fact, I have so much to do that I shall have to spend the first three hours in prayer!*”

Now, the Bible doesn’t give us any rules about when we can or cannot pray. The saints of the Old Testament are sometimes described as praying three times a day. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul says that, *in one sense*, you and I should be praying always and at all times. There, he’s talking about the posture of our hearts. He’s telling us that like the man in Psalm 1, we should always be mediating on the word of God and communing with God as we go throughout our day.

So it’s true that the Bible doesn’t give us any hard and fast rules, and yet what we find is that the Bible does indicate at least two things about prayer and that is, that we must pray every day *and* the very best time for regular prayer is in the morning.

Now, when I say that we must pray every day, I'm taking that from the Lord's Prayer. Remember—when Jesus was teaching his disciples, he didn't say *if* you pray but *when* you pray, and then, one of the things he told them to say is, *Give us this day our daily bread.*

As I was preparing this message, I came across a very challenging idea. And that is that a prayerless day (let alone several prayerless days) is nothing but a proclamation of self-sufficiency. It's a declaration of independence from God. And of course, that affected me because it reminded me that every time I wake up and rush into my day without prayer, I'm telling God that I don't need Him. I'm saying that I can live my life—even if it's just for a day—in the power of my own strength. And Congregation, nothing could be further from the truth!

Just think about it: If Jesus, the Son of the Living God, that one who was given the Spirit without measure, felt the need to pray on a daily basis, then you and I have an infinitely greater need to do the same. You and I who are weak and frail, and full of sin—how can we even entertain the thought that we can take a single step in the right direction, apart from the grace of God?

The fact is, we can't. So as we look at what our Lord is doing in this text, it should remind us of what we're missing every day when we fail to pray. Isaiah 40 gives us a beautiful picture of the blessing that comes from looking to the LORD for the grace and strength that we need. The prophet says:

Have you not known? And have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. For even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But those who wait on the LORD, shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

What a beautiful passage. As you think about what Isaiah says here, I would encourage you to receive it as the very word of God; as a promise that God makes to you personally. That if you would seek the LORD, the everlasting God, then He will provide you with everything you need to serve him in this world every single day. There's no question that this is exactly

what Jesus is doing in our text. Knowing the various challenges and difficulties that lie ahead, He's taking time to seek His Father's face and pray for his day.

So then, we can easily make the point that prayer must be daily activity, but here, we don't want to miss the fact that Jesus is praying, specifically, in the morning. In other words, daily prayer is good, and yet *morning prayer is ideal*.

In Psalm 88, David provides us with an emphasis on both of these things. First in verse 9 he says, O LORD, I have called upon you daily; and I have stretched out my hands to you. Then in verse 13, he says, To you I have cried out, and in the morning my prayer comes before you. Likewise, in Psalm 5 he mentions the timing of his prayer. In verse 3 he says, My voice you shall hear in the morning, O LORD. In the morning I will direct it to you.

Obviously then, there's something special about making prayer the very first activity of the day, and it's probably more than just a matter of recognizing our various needs. Because remember, prayer is not just petitioning God, but it's also praising God and thanking Him for everything we already have. In that sense, there's a principle here, and that is that *God deserves the very best that we have to give*. In the morning, when our mind is fresh and our thoughts are clear, we need to give ourselves to praising God for giving us another day of life in this world.

Remember, prayer is an act of worship, and the Bible describes it as a spiritual sacrifice that we make unto the LORD. Peter calls it the "sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving" and in Psalm 141 the Psalmist says that prayer is like the "incense" that ascends to the throne of God, and the "lifting up of his hands" is like a "sacrifice" on the altar of the LORD. And so here, when we see that Jesus wakes up early, long before the sun comes up, we see that he not only recognizes that His Father is the great provider of everything he needs, but also that His Father is worthy of the first and best that he has to offer.

You see it's true that Jesus came into this world not to be served, but to serve. And yet it's also true that, greater than his desire to serve any man, was his desire to serve and worship God! And it's here, I think, that we can appreciate the other detail that Mark

provides, and that is the location of the Lord's prayer. Mark says that he *went out and departed to a solitary place*.

As you read through the Gospel narratives, you'll notice that one of the great criticisms that Jesus had toward the leaders of his day, was that in many of the things they did, they only did it to be seen by other people. If you read through Matthew 23, you can see that this is exactly what Jesus said: Right there, as he began to confront the leaders for their religious hypocrisy, he says to the people in verse 5, *All their works they do to be seen by men!* And when he says that, he's also talking about the way that they prayed.

In Matthew 6, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns about hypocrisy in prayer. He says, *And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.* Jesus knows that we can struggle with the temptation of being superficial and vain. He knows that public prayer is a necessary and formal aspect of our lives so he's especially warning us about the motive that we have in our hearts.

Are we really praying to God?

Or are we praying just to look and sound religious in the presence of other men?

I think the answer to that question can be found in another question: As you think about your life of prayer, does it consist *only* in public prayer? Or, does it also consist in private prayer, where it's you and God, and you and God alone?

Now, certainly, that's a soul-searching question, but it's good for us to think about it because, in our text, Jesus is spending time with God in prayer alone. So by doing that, he's giving us an example to follow. He's teaching us that our prayers must be motivated with a love for God and not for the praise of men. The whole point of secret prayer, is that it removes all pretense, and all occasion for hypocrisy. There's no show; there's no spot-light; there's no crowd of people that you need to impress.

What a challenging point of application right?! But again, this is good for us to consider. And this is why, in the sermon on the mount, Jesus goes on to say, *But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.*

Jesus was seeking His Father's reward. And he was seeking it by true and sincere devotion to Him. And so Mark says, He rose up, early in the morning, and he went out to a solitary place, *and there he prayed.*

Well, in verse 36 and 37, we see that later on that morning, the people of the city were looking for Jesus again. They came to Simon's house, and when the disciples saw the crowds, Mark says that they went out *searching for Jesus*. When they finally found him, they said: *Everyone is looking for you!*

But, in verse 38, Jesus reminds them of something very important. In fact, he says it in a way that deserves our attention. He says, *Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth.* In other words, Jesus is reminding the disciples that, even with all the different aspects of his ministry, the preaching of the Gospel held the preeminent place. Notice that he says, about the preaching of the Gospel — *for this purpose I have come forth.*

Now, theologically, that's an important statement, but in terms of the context of our passage, I think it gives us an insight about the contents of his morning prayer. So often, the prayers of Jesus are mentioned, but there's no record of what he actually said. And yet, many times, if we think about what Jesus just did or is getting ready to do, then we can usually give a good guess about what his prayer consisted of. And here, I think that's also the case. In this instance, Jesus was probably asking His Father to be with him as he went out to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Contextually, that fits very well.

This should remind us about how important it is for the ministers of the Gospel to devote themselves to prayer. If there's anything about the ministry of the word that we need to remember, it's the fact that the power of the Gospel is not in the messenger. Rather, it must come from the blessing of God Himself. This is why, in Acts 6:4, the apostles

said, *But as for us – we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*

And where do you think they learned that? They learned it from the ministry of Jesus. They knew that the power he had in ministry only came from the time that he spent alone with God in prayer.

Now – it's true that preaching held a preeminent place in the Lord's ministry, but if you look down to verse 39 you can see that it was *more than just preaching* that he had to prepare for. Mark says that, after he left off with prayer, he went out to preach the Gospel in the synagogues of the other cities—and to *cast out demons* as well. From this, we can probably get the full picture of the contents of our Lord's prayer. Jesus was seeking God for the *power* that he needed to do *all* the work that His Father gave him to do. That included preaching, teaching, healing, *and casting out demons wherever they were found.*

You know, it's interesting, because later on in the Gospel of Mark, this becomes an issue that comes up for the disciples, and there's a lesson that they had to learn:

In Mark chapter 9 Jesus comes upon a crowd where he sees all the people and the scribes disputing with his disciples. When he asks them what's going on, one of the men says that his little boy was possessed by a demon, but that, when he brought him to the disciples, they could not cast it out.

Of course, Jesus healed that little boy and he cast out the demon right then and there. But the key to the story comes later. In verse 28, it says, *When they came into the house, the disciples asked him privately, Why could we not cast it out?* Jesus answered and said, *This kind only comes out by prayer and fasting.*

Now, fasting is something we can discuss at another time, but notice here that Jesus is reminding them that the power to cast out demons *depends on a life of devoted prayer.* The lesson that they learned then, is that prayer is something that can never be neglected.

Now, as we close our message this morning, we've focused on several aspects of prayer – and each of them is taken directly from the text. First we saw that prayer is

necessary. If Jesus prayed, we have no reason to believe that we can survive without it. Second, we saw that prayer must be a daily activity. And finally, we saw that the morning is the ideal time for prayer. This is true because effective prayer is that which takes place between us and God alone. It's not a matter of impressing other people, but seeking the grace and mercy of our heavenly Father!

But as we go our way this morning, we should never forget that prayer was not just something Jesus engaged in to give us an example to follow. We also need to remember that it was by the prayer-life of Jesus Christ that our salvation was accomplished. And here's what I mean by that. Jesus didn't just engage in daily prayer. Or morning prayer. Jesus didn't just pray in solitary places. But as you survey his life and ministry you'll find that our Lord prayed at every turn and every step of the way. Prayer, in the ministry of Jesus Christ preceded *every significant event*.

- Jesus prayed at his baptism, why? To prepare for his testing in the wilderness.
- Jesus prayed in our passage, why? To prepare for the preaching of the Gospel and the spiritual battles he had to face.
- Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, why? To prepare to be handed over to the Gentiles to be arrested, tried, condemned, and nailed to the cross!
- Congregation, Jesus even prayed while he was hanging on the cross, as he prepared to die for the sin of his people, saying *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*, and again, just before he took his final breath, he prayed, *Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit*.

In one sense, we can say that the whole ministry of Jesus Christ was one continual prayer, lifted up to God as a sweet-smelling savor; a sacrifice holy and acceptable to God. And truly, it was only because of this glorious life of prayer that you and I can be saved by the finished work of Jesus Christ. In other words, it's only because Jesus prayed the way he did that, now, you and I can also pray as well. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:18, it is *through him that we have access by one Spirit unto the Father*.

This being the case, why in the world would we ever want to neglect the matter of prayer? How can we ever say that we're too busy or too tired? Why would we not rather be filled with a passion for seeking God every moment of every day of this life? Certainly, we have every good reason to do so. As Matthew Henry once said: *Every day we have reason to bless the LORD, for every day He is blessing us. Amen.*