

## “Too Busy Not To Pray”

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Scripture Lessons: Mark 1:29-39

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According to Mark’s Gospel, this was the day Jesus’ reputation took right off. They were in Capernaum. He cast a demon out of a man, then Mark tells us “at once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region” (1:28). Later that day he healed the apostle Peter’s mother. Then Mark tells us, “that evening, at sunset they brought to him *all* who were sick and *all* who were possessed. And the whole city was gathered around the door” (1:32-33). The next morning the disciples were frantic because Jesus was gone! When they found Jesus they said, “Where were you? Everyone’s been looking for you!” Understandably—no one had ever seen anything like this before. The crowd, looking for Jesus’ help, was growing, wanting. Jesus actually didn’t tell them what he’d been up to. He just said, let’s get on with it. But even with his new superstar status, and the new crush of demands for his attention and help, Jesus still took time out and time apart to pray.

From that day the importance of prayer for Jesus was seen by his followers. In Luke 11:1, we read about one such occasion, “Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after He had finished one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray”. I’ve always liked this verse, because it is such an honest confession. Prayer had always been an important part of the Jewish faith. Many of the Psalms are prayers. Yet, despite this heritage, these followers of Jesus can still ask their master, “Teach us to pray”. I suspect that the people of God have always felt an inadequacy in prayer. The good news is that God recognizes that as well, and God, out of grace, compensates for us in our prayer life. Paul wrote to the Romans about prayer, saying this about them (and by inference, all of us): “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought.” (Romans 8:26, 27). Note that Paul wrote “we”, which included him. If Paul could include himself in this confession, then I think that can free us up to include ourselves as well. With that attitude the disciples request—“teach us to pray.”—can sincerely become our request.

This verse from Romans helps us in another way as well. We learn here that the Holy Spirit helps us in prayer. In fact, we find here a mysterious, even mystical sense that the Spirit takes our faltering words and adds the Spirit’s understanding and power to our prayers. So our prayers to God are never prayed alone, which is another point of comfort and confidence for us—even if we feel inadequate about it.

Not long ago someone came to me with a question arising out of Jesus teaching on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him”. So the person asked me, “so why pray?” I think questions like this stem from an assumption we tend to have that prayer is mostly about making requests of God. The comedian Flip Wilson had a bit where he played a black gospel preacher. He would say, “I’m gonna pray now; anyone want anything?” Richard Foster, who has written extensively on spirituality, talks of this attitude towards prayer. He wrote that some of our prayers resemble “a spiritual shopping list, launched heavenward on the wings of pious words” which turns God into a “cosmic bellhop”. Now, please don’t misunderstand me, there is nothing wrong with bringing concerns and requests to God in prayer. Jesus did himself, and He encouraged us to ask with open and persistent trust for what we need (Luke 11: 5 – 13). It’s just that prayer is much more than making requests of God.

At its core, prayer is our relationship with God. It is how we connect. Now, when it comes to relationships we enjoy with other people, each of us has our own unique style of relating to another. Some people are more emotional and relate through their feelings. Some people are more cognitive, so they relate to others more out of their head than their hearts. Some are concise communicators, other people never know when to stop talking! As you think of the different relationships you have, they are all unique. Thus, how each person relates to God can be very different as well. Back in my London ON congregation a man was making a very important presentation at a congregational meeting. His opening words were, “I’m nervous, so let us pray.” We all dutifully bowed our heads and the man said, “Dear God, help me. Thank you.” And then he immediately launched into his presentation. He was well into his introduction before any of us realized that the prayer was over! It was so very brief, but so incredibly sincere and heartfelt. But that is what God wants, more than the style or number of words. A connection with us that is sincere and heartfelt. There is no one right way to pray, with one exception. That is: allocate time to pray. We see

that in today's story. Even if the world is clamouring after you, wants things from you, is filling your daybook. Take time to pray.

There is nothing wrong with prayer that makes requests of God. But if that is the main diet of our prayer life then prayer can become a task... the task of offering our concerns to God and hoping God will respond in a way that gets things done... with some pretty big help! But our story today gives us another clue about prayer. Jesus—facing literally hundreds of things to do, as so many people came to him for help— took time apart simply to be alone and quiet in the presence of God. In the end I think this is mostly what prayer is about: being with God. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a priest asked an aging peasant what he was doing for hours sitting quietly in the chapel. The peasant replied, “I look at God, and God looks at me, and we are both very happy”. I like the story, for it reminds us that prayer is communion – a coming into oneness. One of the deepest learnings that CS Lewis made in his own life of faith was how much prayer changed him. That can come to us as a surprising notion. If our prayer life is dominated by the requests we make of God then prayer for us is rooted in how we hope to change God's mind. But if we see prayer as communion, companionship, partnership, then our prayer life will be about relationship, not task.

If we want a greater sense of God in our lives, then we need to slow down and make time for God in our lives. Our story today recounts the day Jesus became a superstar healer and exorcist. The next day was going to be an endurance test. He was going to face a huge crowd wanting a piece of that action. So before being sucked into that day, he took time away to be with God. I suspect most days for Jesus would have been pretty hectic. His, I think, was a life of regular distraction. Setting time apart to be with God ensures distraction never fully wins. Distraction, for people of faith, leads to losing our mindfulness of God. Paul in one of his letters encouraged his readers: “pray without ceasing.” Without ceasing. Paul is talking about having an on-going mindfulness of God. That is hard for us because our thoughts get so distracted by the busy-ness of our lives. And Jesus' life at times was busier and more distracting than ours.

In your typical day, how long can you go between thoughts about God? What would be the normal timespan? What would be your record? I can go a whole day without thinking about God. And because of that I've built a little schedule of prayer to create

little oases of time apart to ensure that my own life of hectic activity and distraction doesn't overwhelm me and the connection I desire to have with God. It's also why I keep my icon leaning up against my computer monitor. The icon distracts me from my work, helps me be mindful of God's presence....and reminds me that my boss is always watching me.

Finding ways like this to be distracted by God also helps foster the relationship we have with God. It can help us bring thoughts of God into the midst of the busyness of our lives. In reading the Psalms you discover that many psalms are prayers. But more than that, many of the psalms are really one half of conversations the psalmists are having with God. Our responsive reading today—Psalm 22—is a good example of this. King David starts out crying “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?...I cry out to you every day and you do not answer!” But after making this plea to God he reassures himself of God's care. “Our ancestors trusted in you and you delivered them.” And then he rants. “I am a worm! I am scorned and despised by people. They make mouths at me.” Then he reassures himself again: You have kept me safe from the day I was born. Then his request: God, do not be far from me. There is no one else to help me. And so the psalm goes. Two weeks ago we were considering the need to tend to one's own soul and the value of “listening to your life”—using reflection on your own life as one starting point in spirituality. David is doing that in this psalm. And in the midst of reflecting on the troubles of his own life he is also remembering his own faith story (recalling moments when he has known God's help) He is also remembering the faith story of the people of God and using those remembrances to reassure himself in his fear. And in the midst of this self-reflection he occasionally lays a plea before God in prayer. This is not so much like prayer we do week by week in worship, but it is prayer all the same. This is reflecting on one's own life, and bringing God into the conversation.

We have a need to make sense of our lives...to glean insights for the facing of life's challenges...to express uncertainties and frustrations that are just too intimate and personal to speak to another person...a place to vent...to acknowledge our fears and failures. When we do this with God, it too is prayer. Prayer that is communion, companionship, partnership. And this grows one's soul. All we need to do is to take periodic times away from the hectic and distracting nature of life and bear one's soul to God. If the Son of God did this.....?