

**Series:** Basic Gospel of Mark

**Title:** Jesus and Prayer

**Text:** Mark 11:17

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Prayer is essential to our spiritual lives. It is for good reason that Scripture admonishes us to “pray constantly” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Via prayer, believers enjoy communion with God. In a sense, they experience what Adam and Eve experienced at the beginning of time. The Bible speaks of how the first man and woman once walked with God “in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” (Genesis 3:8). The language of Genesis picturesquely described intimate fellowship between the Creator and the first humans.

Unfortunately, sin ruined the bliss of Eden. It created separation between mankind and God. The good news, however, is that Jesus’ work on the cross made communication with God possible once again. Such realities were depicted by the tearing of the veil in the temple at the crucifixion (Matthew 27:51). Because of what Jesus has done, born-again believers can call out to God and commune with Him at any time. The Bible says, “...let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

The gospel of Mark has a lot to say about the subject to prayer. On various occasions, it speaks of both Jesus’ personal commitment to prayer and His public teaching on of prayer. In Mark 11:17, we find a strong statement from Jesus on the subject. In rebuking first-century religionists who used the place of worship as a platform for merchandise, our Lord said, “Is it not written, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of thieves!” Our Lord’s strong condemnation gave a strong commendation for the practice of prayer. Let’s look at several passages from the gospel of Mark to discover what’s involved in the development of a strong prayer life.

### **PRAYER AND PRIORITIES (MARK 1:35)**

In the first chapter of Mark, we receive a glimpse into Jesus’ personal prayer routine. The Bible says, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he got up, went out, and made his way to a deserted place; and there he was praying” (Mark 1:35). Notice that Jesus got up “very early” to pray. He even got up “while it was still dark.” The original language of the New Testament indicates Jesus got up at some point between 3am and 6am.<sup>1</sup>

If you read the passage that preceded Mark 1:35, you would discover that the previous day was a busy one (Mark 1:21-34). Jesus had preached in a synagogue, healed people, and cast out many demons. Considering the events of the day, our Lord was undoubtedly exhausted. Despite such realities, He still made prayer a priority.

It is important to note that Mark’s words were not intended as a mandate for early morning praying. The time at which one prays is not what’s most important.

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson, 263.

What's important is that one makes time for prayer. Mark's intent was to emphasize our Lord's attention to priorities.

Jesus knew what faithful saints of all generations have known — discipline is key in developing a strong prayer life. If one is going to be faithful to pray, one must manage time well. Both David and Daniel (Daniel 6:10) exhibited such discipline. They scheduled time for prayer into their lives. In the book of Psalms, David said, "Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: And he shall hear my voice" (Psalm 55:17, KJV). Of Daniel's commitment to prioritizing prayer, Scripture says, "... he went into his house. The windows in its upstairs room opened toward Jerusalem, and three times a day he got down on his knees, prayed, and gave thanks to his God, just as he had done before" (Daniel 6:10). It is worth noting, that both David and Daniel's commitment to prayer took place in the face of great opposition. The context of Psalm 55 and Daniel 6 reveals such to be true.

From Jesus, Daniel, and David, we learn that personal priorities are a major factor in developing a powerful prayer life. Many falter in prayer for one simple reason — they don't make room for it in their personal schedule. If one doesn't dedicate time to prayer, he or she probably won't pray. Forethought is half the battle. Strong saints realize that one must "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33), making personal worship a priority. The call to "train yourself in godliness" can certainly be applied to prayer (1 Timothy 4:7). A degree of spiritual sweat and effort is needed if one wants to become a prayer warrior.

Do you make time for prayer? Be careful that you don't allow the busyness of modern culture rob you of the joy of communion with God. Set apart a portion of your day for prayer. Maybe the morning is best for you. Or perhaps you have free time around lunch or before bed. It could be that several different smaller chunks of time throughout the day are more beneficial. Do what works for you. The exact method isn't what's most important. Prioritization is what matters. Learn from Jesus - you must make time for prayer!

### **PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL POWER (MARK 9:29)**

Immediately after His transfiguration (Mark 9:1-11), Jesus performed an incredible miracle, casting a demon out of a young boy. The miracle was intended to demonstrate Jesus' power over the spirit realm, confirming His divine status as the Son of God. However, the miracle also served as a platform for teaching on the power of prayer. Jesus healed the boy at the request of the boy's father. The man had previously sought help from the disciples. Unfortunately, they weren't with Jesus on the mountain for the Transfiguration. When Jesus came down from the mountain with the other three, the man begged Jesus, saying, "Teacher, I brought my son to you. He has a spirit that makes him unable to speak...I asked your disciples to drive it out, but they couldn't" (Mark 9:17-18).

Weary of working with faithless disciples, Jesus opined, "You unbelieving generation, how long will I be with you? How long must I put up with you?" (Mark 9:19). After ordering the man to bring his son to Him, Jesus healed the boy. Perplexed by their failure to perform the exorcism, the disciples asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" (Mark 9:28). Jesus replied, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer" (Mark 9:29).

The disciples needed to learn how to draw power through prayer. This is a pivotal lesson all disciples must learn at some point. Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me" (John:15:5). Paul said "I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me". (Philippians 4:13). Preachers cannot preach, parents cannot parent, and Christians cannot live the Christian life effectively apart from a persistent prayer life. One cannot fight indwelling sin, endure severe trials, or serve effectively within a local church without the power of prayer.

Perhaps there are degrees of discouragement or forms of temptation you can't seem to overcome. Maybe you to experience the power of prevailing prayer. One has commented on the failure of the disciples by saying, "They were powerless because they were prayerless. Their self-complacency spelled defeat...They had too much faith in themselves, too little in Christ."<sup>2</sup> Have you learned the secret of abiding prayer? Are you drawing strength from Jesus through daily intercession? Know this — there are some battles that can't be won apart from the power of prayer. Never forget the words of Jesus — "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer" (Mark 9:29).

### **PRAYER AND FAITH (MARK 11:24)**

Mark 11 contains an account of incident involving a fig tree. While visiting Jerusalem for the holy week of the Passover, Jesus and His disciples passed by such a tree. Finding no fruit on it, Jesus pronounced a curse, saying, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" (Mark 11:14). To some, our Lord's actions seem incredulous. Some have even remarked on the fact that fig trees didn't normally bear fruit at the time of the Passover. Why did Jesus pronounce a curse on a fruitless fig tree, especially when it wasn't even the season for figs?

It is important that we understand the purpose in Jesus' actions. His intent was to use the tree as an object lesson. For Him, it represented first-century Israel. At the time of His life and ministry, the chosen people of God were in an apostate state. Though they had been specially chosen to be a light to the world, they had not exhibited genuine repentance, the type of repentance that would produce good works (Matthew 1:8). Jesus performed a sign and wonder in cursing the fig tree (Hebrews 2:4). He accomplished a miracle that was intended to teach a lesson concerning the importance of good works in the lives of God's people.

Later, Jesus and the Twelve passed by the cursed tree. When they did, the disciples noticed the tree had withered and died. Amazed, Peter said, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered" (Mark 11:21). The Lord used His disciples' astonishment for another teaching opportunity. He said, "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him" (Mark 11:22-23). Our Lord's reply to Peter revealed important truth about prayer. In particular, it showed that faith is a prerequisite for powerful praying.

One should not mistake Jesus' words as a promise for literal mountain-moving power. His words were figurative. He used a proverbial expression from His day to emphasize the potent effect of faith-filled prayer. Paul used the same figure of speech

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<sup>2</sup> Robertson, 343.

in 1 Corinthians 13:2. As in our day, a mountain was a colloquial metaphor for a challenge or difficulty.

Jesus' point in using such a metaphor was to emphasize the power of faith in prayer. Believers can move figurative mountains when they pray with an ardent trust in the Lord. Such faith, however, should not be regarded as wild card to get what one wants in prayer. Many modern believers have an approach to prayer that resembles the shenanigans of the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:26-29. Through a "name it and claim it" philosophy, they boast of faith that will get them what they want in life.

The type of faith that empowers prayer involves a humble trust in the Word of God. We know this is true because Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13-14). We express faith in prayer by praying in alignment with God's truth. In the eyes of the Lord, effective prayer is inextricably linked to such faith (Luke 18:8). Additionally, when prayer is grounded in such faith, one's prayers will be powerful. They will receive a response from God.

Learn this lesson from prayer — faith is pivotal. And the faith that pleases God is rooted in the Word of God. If you want to have faith-filled prayers, pray for things that are in alignment with God's truth. Pray Biblical prayers. By praying such prayers, you will demonstrate a faith in God, since the Bible is the Word of God. In praying faith-filled, biblical prayers, you will be ensured that your prayers will be effective, accomplishing the will of God.

### **PRAYER AND FORGIVENESS (MARK 11:25)**

In the same passage concerning the fig tree, Jesus provided another important lesson on prayer. He said, "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven will also forgive you your wrongdoing" (Mark 11:25). According to Jesus, prayer will fail if one is unwilling to forgive others. His words should not be regarded as some sort of heavenly tit-for-tat payback toward those who hold a grudge. The Lord did not intend to enact a punitive measure; instead, He simply meant to convey an important spiritual reality. Enmity toward others stifles prayer. It is hard to focus on God if one is focused on hurt toward others. If we want to engage in meaningful interaction with the Lord, we must first do the spiritual work of clearing our souls of bitterness. Scripture is strong concerning this matter. It continually presents a lack of forgiveness as a reason for ineffectual prayer. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

We all are aware of how a distressing situation can distract our attention from quality time with others. A similar phenomenon exists in the spiritual world. If we hold a grudge, our soul will be stifled from seeking the Lord. It is for this reason that Peter encouraged husbands to get their hearts right with their wives before they set their hearts on prayer. He said, "Husbands, in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker partner, showing them honor as coheirs of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7).

If we want to experience the life-changing power of prayer, we must deal with the grudges and complaints we hold in our hearts toward one another. Interpersonal

negativity will ruin worship, stall prayers, and squelch intimacy with God. We can't expect the Lord to bless our prayers if we carry a mental checklist of all of the wrongs committed against us, if we label certain people by their past failures and refuse to forgive them. Jesus was a model for us in regard to these things. When He was crucified, He expressed forgiveness towards those who hung Him on the cross. He prayed, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

If we want to engage with God in prayer, we must forgive. The Greek word in Mark 11:25 is *aphiēmi*. It carries the idea of one letting something or someone go. It conjures ideas of an escape, of a person being freed.<sup>3</sup> What a beautiful picture of forgiveness! When we forgive another, we choose to release the person. Forgiveness involves letting an offense go. You can't hold on to it. You must release it.

It is important to note that such forgiveness can't be accomplished through man's power. If you have struggled with the bondage of bitterness, you sure know that it's not easy to forgive. In fact, many have found it nearly impossible! Is there any help for those who struggle? Fortunately there is. Help is found — ironically — in prayer! When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He instructed them to pray concerning forgiveness. In what is now known as the Lord's Prayer, He told His disciples to pray the following — "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

A lack of forgiveness can disable our prayers, but prayer can enable forgiveness. If you want to have powerful prayers, you must forgive. If you want to forgive, you must pray. Before praying about other things, first pray about the hurts and bitterness in your soul. In time you will find the capacity to let such things go. When you do, your prayer life will become more powerful. Forgiveness will bolster your sense of spiritual freedom and it will enhance your fellowship with God.

### **PRAYER AND THE WILL OF GOD (MARK 14:32-35)**

As the time of His death drew near, Jesus escaped to pray. Mark 14:32 says, "Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he told his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.'" The word "then" continues the narrative from the previous verses. The events in Mark 14:32 occurred after the Passover meal (Mark 14:22-26) and after Jesus' prophesy concerning Peter's upcoming denial (Mark 14:27-31). With the activities of a busy day behind Him, Jesus retreated to a solitary place for prayer.

Jesus went to a place called "Gethsemane." Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus regularly used the place for private prayer while in Jerusalem (Luke 22:39). The name "Gethsemane" was drawn from an Aramaic word that meant "olive press."<sup>4</sup> Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane was significant. The location was a place in which olives were often crushed. Gethsemane evoked imagery of the way in which Jesus would be crushed under the weight of humanity's sin.

As Jesus retreated to pray at Gethsemane, he took a select group of disciples with Him — "Peter, James, and John." According to Mark, Jesus left the other disciples

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<sup>3</sup> Zodhiates, 298.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 99.

in the outskirts of the garden to “sit” (Mark 14:32). Why did He only take Peter, James, and John with Him? Well, on previous occasions in Mark’s gospel, He relied on the three when He encountered really important matters (Mark 5:37; 9:2). Undoubtedly, the prayer session at hand was of great significance. Jesus was in a state of deep emotional distress and He desired the presence of His closest companions.

Notice Jesus’ agony in prayer. Mark used strong language to depict intense travail in our Lord’s soul. He said Jesus “began to be deeply distressed and troubled” (Mark 14:33). The word translated “troubled” is one that was rendered “very heavy” by the King James Version of the Bible. The Greek word underlying English translations is one that literally meant “not at home” or “away from home.” It figuratively spoke of “intense discomfort,” of one being “excessively concerned.”<sup>5</sup> One has attempted to encapsulate the agony of Jesus’ prayer by saying, “Horror and anguish overwhelmed him” as He prayed.<sup>6</sup> Another has commented, “The language used here is very strong indeed; it conveys the idea of a man who is far away from home and feels abandoned, longing for companionship but finding none. It is clear that Jesus’ whole being was profoundly shaken as he began to feel the weight of his coming suffering.”<sup>7</sup>

What was the reason for our Lord’s anguish? Some may think His primary struggle was the thought of the physical suffering that awaited Him at the cross. However, it seems our Lord was driven by a different sort of dread. The gospels reveal He never cried out in agony over the physical affliction associated with Calvary. The only time He expressed pain was when He underwent separation from God. Matthew recorded Jesus’ only expression of pain at the cross, depicting Him as crying out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Matthew 27:46).

In order to make atonement for sin, Jesus had to experience separation from God for sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). Such is what made the cross so horrific. It is the reason He felt “distressed and troubled” as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. His soul felt as if it was “not at home.” Pending separation from God made Him homesick for the heavenly status He enjoyed prior to the incarnation (John 1:1; Philippians 2:5-8).<sup>8</sup>

Jesus dreaded the isolation from God He would experience at Golgotha, but He also dreaded something else. He undoubtedly dreaded the thought of becoming sin. Scripture teaches that Jesus became sin on our behalf at the cross. Can you imagine the horror our Lord must have had at such a prospect? He was the spotless Lamb of God. He never said, thought, or did anything that went against God’s Moral Law. He was perfectly pure and perfect. It was surely difficult for one with complete righteousness to embrace all the unrighteousness of human history. Ryle has commented, “It was a sense of the unutterable weight of our sins and transgressions which were then specially laid upon him. He was being ‘made a curse for us.’ He was

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<sup>5</sup> Robertson, 212.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, 234.

<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, 239.

<sup>8</sup> Robertson, 212.

bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows, according to the covenant he came on earth to fulfill.”<sup>9</sup>

Dreading the cross, Jesus prayed for God’s will to be fulfilled. Mark 14:36 says He prayed, “Not what I will, but what you will.” Jesus was fully God and fully man. As such, His human part struggled with the thoughts of dying by crucifixion. Jesus needed to submit to the will of God (John 6:38) in order for the plan of redemption to be accomplished. Such a reality did not diminish His Divine nature. It was just a reality that resulted from what theologians call “the hypostatic union.”

Maybe there was a subtle lesson for Mark’s original readers in Jesus’ prayer. Many of them faced threat of persecution from the Roman Empire. Perhaps some were struggling with their faith. Maybe some needed to know how to pray about the prospect of suffering for the gospel. Was it wrong to ask for deliverance from martyrdom?. Jesus showed that believers should be resigned to the will of God first of all. One may not know what the Lord desires in certain situations in life. When such occurs, it is best to simply pray for the God’s will to be accomplished.

A lesson is found for us in all of this. We should seek after God’s will in our prayers. When our supplications and intercession are in alignment with the Lord’s Divine purposes, we can expect a response. This is what Jesus meant when He said, “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:14).

Some within modern Christianity are known for their unhealthy emphasis on praying in faith. At times, they have actually cast aspersions on those who mimic Jesus’ prayer. The thinking is that one should not put a condition on one’s prayers by using phrases like “if it is your will.” Many believe that such expectations and caveats are rooted in a lack of faith.

Such man-made teaching is contrary to Jesus’ practice of prayer. From our Lord we receive an example for our personal prayer lives. Sometimes we won’t know what to pray for, or how we ought to pray. In some seasons of life, we may feel like Paul did when told the Philippians He was “torn between the two” (Philippians 1:23). We may feel completely unable to discern God’s will in a matter. It is okay on such occasions to express our confusion and our desires to God in an honest fashion. It is permissible to simply ask the Lord to accomplish His will. When you pray, be real. If you are struggling to know God’s will, admit it. Tell God about your confusion and simply ask Him to accomplish His will. He will honor and bless such authenticity. He will lead you to His will. Praying for God’s will to be done is an important ingredient of powerful praying. Mark’s gospel reveals such to be true.

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<sup>9</sup> Ryle, 250.