

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 9, 2017

Jesus Is Still Busy

Luke 5:12-16

At the end of last Sunday's sermon, I stressed how our outward action of working for justice in the world needs to be grounded in our inward life of relationship with God. That's because the gospel doesn't just address social conditions. It also addresses the condition of the human heart. So if we want to live lives devoted, for the long haul, to justice and peace, we need to cultivate fellowship and intimacy with Jesus, who is the source of who we are and what we're doing in the world.

Jesus himself practiced this in his own ministry through regular periods of prayerful engagement with God. At the end of today's text, Luke tells us that "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (v. 16). Often. In other words, Luke isn't saying that on this one occasion things got so intense and demanding that Jesus decided he needed to retreat from the crowds. Instead, this was a pattern of repeated behavior for our Lord. Jesus regularly turned away from the outward and visible work of doing kingdom good and turned toward the One who was the source of his power to do kingdom good.

Jedd Medefind is president of a Christian ministry for orphans. In a recent article, he wrote:

Over many years of work in both government and ministry, I've noticed a common storyline among the justice-minded, including myself. First comes the *waking*: We begin to ache over the wrong we see and yearn to set it right. Waking springs into *working*, a noble undertaking with encouraging initial progress. But eventually disappointment strikes, and we *weary* as the world's brokenness proves far more stubborn than we'd imagined. Finally, one day we find our idealism has *withered* to a lifeless husk.¹

Medefind cites multiple examples of this pattern of waking, working, wearying, and withering. So he pauses to raise the question: "What sustains us when the rain stops? Here's the simple and age-old truth: If we have no source beneath the surface, we will eventually run dry. The work of justice and mercy cannot be sustained apart from a vibrant inner life."²

Now, to be sure, Jesus had a lot more going for his public ministry than just a vibrant inner life. He wasn't able to do what he did simply because he was in the habit of doing his daily devotions. Jesus was divine. He was the embodiment of Israel's God, whose promised reign was breaking into the world through his preaching, teaching, healing, and exorcising demons. And people were responding in droves to what Jesus was announcing and enacting. Luke opens today's text with the general statement, "While Jesus was in one of the towns. . ." (v. 12). This is another way of saying, "Also typical of Jesus' ministry is the following."³ Then comes a story of the healing of a man with leprosy, followed by a summary statement of Jesus' growing popularity in Galilee. Even when Jesus tries to get others to dial it down on the publicity, his reputation still spreads, and the crowds keep coming. In the midst of all Jesus' working, there are plenty of moments of wearying.

One option is for Jesus is to step it up. But instead, Jesus steps back, steps away, steps out. He withdraws to the wilderness, and prays. I'm guessing this wasn't just a quick consultation with God, a brief ministerial time out, before reentering the fray of the kingdom mission. Unlike us, Jesus wasn't always obsessed with time. Actually, according to the

editors of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, “time” is the most frequently used noun in the English language. This is reflected in many book titles, including some coming from Christian publishers. *Sixty Seconds with God*, *Daily Prayers Sixty Seconds Long*, and *Instant Sermons for Busy Pastors*—these are probably not the kinds of titles that Jesus pulled out of his backpack when he reached a place of solitude.⁴

When these moments came for Jesus to withdraw from the intensity of his ministry, he was less concerned with religious efficiency and more concerned with spiritual striving and struggle, the kind that would help him reconnect with the source of his work. Jesus knew that prayer wasn’t just a ministerial accessory that was nice to do if time permitted, once all the other clergy duties were taken care of first. There’s a story about a pastor who was praying in his church office one morning and a prominent member of the congregation called. The secretary told the gentleman that the pastor was busy praying right now. “Praying!” said the church member. “Shouldn’t he be working?”

For followers of Jesus, praying is part of our working for the kingdom. What’s more, deep, diligent, and enduring work for the kingdom is impossible without praying. There’s a Christian human rights group called International Justice Mission (IJM) that has offices in Washington, DC, and around the world. They focus on issues like combating human trafficking and other forms of violence against the poor. Every member of their staff spends the first 30 minutes of the workday in silence, as an opportunity for prayer and spiritual reflection. The staff also gathers for 30 minutes of daily corporate prayer, in addition to regular offsite spiritual retreats. IJM CEO Gary Haugen warns against “prayerless striving,” which can lead to exhaustion. He says, “I have learned just how crucial it is to settle my soul in the presence of Jesus every morning.”⁵

I believe that settling his soul in the presence of God was part of the rhythm of Jesus’ ministry. One of the primary reasons Jesus was able to bring the saving, restoring power of God into the life of the man with leprosy was because he had been doing, regularly and repeatedly, the kind of thing that he did at the end of today’s text, namely, spending time with the Father. Jesus knew that being with lost and suffering people was inseparable from being with God. So Jesus practiced a pattern of exit and entry. He exited from the crowds so that he could then enter their lives again with renewed passion and caring touch.

“Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man” (v. 13a). That’s not what most people did when they came near someone with leprosy. On the contrary, they usually kept their distance, partly out of fear and partly out of religious duty. Leprosy referred to various skin diseases that left a person defiled and excluded. It was more than just a physical illness. It carried a social stigma that left its victims cut off from human community. If you were a leprosy person, you had to wear torn clothes and disheveled hair. You had to live alone or with other lepers. When you came near another person, you had to cover your upper lip and call out, “Unclean, unclean” (Leviticus 13:45-46). The life of a leper was a life of untouchable isolation.

But Jesus reached. Jesus touched. Jesus entered the man’s isolation. And one of the reasons Jesus was able to overcome the leper’s aloneness was because he himself knew how to be alone with God. In other words, Jesus’ own connectedness to God equipped and empowered him to reconnect the leper with God and with others. Because Jesus spent time in solitude, the leper would no longer be solitary.

Zack Eswine describes a time of intense busyness and overcommitment in his life. People around him tried to get his attention, but he refused to listen until he got a special letter that changed his perspective. Eswine writes:

[An older mentor named Bill told me], “Zack, your life is like a five-alarm fire. You are coming and going in so many directions. I worry about you.”

One of my bosses echoed the same sentiment ten years later. "You are doing so many different things," she said. "We are afraid you are going to burn out. We want you around here for a long time, so pace yourself, okay?"

Her voice was soon joined by others. Two colleagues invited me to lunch. Another called on the phone. "We are worried about you," they said.

Then I received a letter. It was the old-fashioned kind of letter with a stamp on the envelope. The words were written by hand with a pen. I opened it and heard my mom's voice as I read. She too must have heard the alarm. "Son," she wrote, "a tree has to have roots to provide shade."⁶

The shade provided by Jesus' ministry had roots in his prayerful, personal engagement with God. And Jesus' ongoing kingdom ministry, which we're called to be part of, requires the same deep roots of us. The good news is that Jesus is still busy. Busy preaching. Busy teaching. Busy saving. Busy healing. Busy reconciling. Busy restoring. Busy praying. Busy being in communion with the Father. And if we want to be part of Jesus' busyness, in all its forms, we have to also be part of his busyness in praying.

In one sense, Jesus wasn't any less busy when he was out in the wilderness praying than he was when surrounded by huge crowds wanting to hear his word and feel his touch. True, being alone, being still, and settling his soul into God's presence, may not have looked as busy as when he was going from village to village, talking on his cell phone, checking his email, making home visits, leading Bible studies, and holding healing services. But for Jesus, tending to his own heart, and having the Spirit breathe new life into him, was something that kept him busy. Not busy to the point of exhaustion, but busy to the point of infusion, as the very life of God filled him for ministry.

Our fellow disciples next door at Lutheran Church of Our Savior have a helpful message on their sign right now. It reads: "God Doesn't Take Summer Breaks—Come and Meet Him." That's interesting to reflect on as we get ready for me to step out of the picture and begin my sabbatical a week from tomorrow. With just one more Sunday to go before we begin this part of our journey together, it's important to remember that over the next few months, in my absence as much as in my presence, our congregation's focus will still be on proclaiming God's kingdom, promoting the gospel, and participating in the ongoing mission of Jesus here in the world. I'll have more to say about that next Sunday as we transition into the sabbatical.

But for now, that church sign message, "God Doesn't Take Summer Breaks—Come and Meet Him," is embodied by your presence here today. You've come here to meet God. You've come here to pray. You've come here to sink your roots more deeply in Christ. Like our Lord Jesus himself, you've come here as a way of stepping out of your daily work for the kingdom, withdrawing from the crowds so to speak, so that you can reconnect with the source of your power and cultivate a more vibrant inner life. And this deep connection to Christ is what will sustain you, strengthen you, and empower you to stay busy in the work of God's reign.

¹ Jedd Medefind, "The Activist Soul: Why the Fight for Social Justice Must Start Within." *Christianity Today* (July/August 2017) 72.

² Medefind, "The Activist Soul," 73.

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) n.p.

⁴ Adapted From David W. Henderson, *Tranquility* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016) 14-16.

⁵ Medefind, "The Activist Soul," 73.

⁶ Zachary W. Eswine, *Sensing Jesus: Life and Ministry as a Human Being* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013) 57.