

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
March 18, 2018

## **Letting Go**

Mark 14:32-42

In our minds, garden plus prayer usually equals serenity. We think of a prayer garden as a place to go in search of some space for peace, quiet, and calm reflection. A trickling fountain, a bed of flowers, a flowing vine, an inviting bench—these are some of the things that make up a good place to meet with God. A tranquil place where we can listen for the Lord's gentle whisper.

Mark Buchanan tells about seeing a portrait depicting Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He says:

Behind Jesus, in the backdrop, is an idyllic (and lakeshore!) Jerusalem. Jesus' face, in angled profile, is coolly serene, aloof almost. His eyes have a far away, dreamy look. His body, perched on a rock, is held with prim straightness. His hands rest on his lap like the front and back covers of a stiff-spined book laid open, face down. . . .

Jesus is perhaps contemplating. Or he is posing, in a stilted way, for a portrait, maybe this one. Or he is daydreaming. But one thing the portrait could never make you believe is that Jesus is weeping, or even capable of such a thing.<sup>1</sup>

In today's Scripture passage, Mark paints a very different portrait. "They went to a place called Gethsemane, . . . (v. 32). In our journey of faith, many of us have been there before. Particularly at this time of the year, as we get closer to the annual remembrance of the events of Holy Week and Easter, we make a stop at Gethsemane. We pause to recall, reflect on, and relive what happened there. It's not a serene scene, except for the disciples who are just snoozing away, while our Lord himself is wrestling in spiritual agony.

Peter Wallace tells about teaching a Sunday School class in which he drew upon the material of a book he had written. The book was about the emotional life of Jesus. By looking at key moments and events in the story of Jesus, Wallace hoped readers could gain deeper insight into who Jesus was. That way, Jesus, in his authentic humanity, could become more alive to those who study him. As he taught the class, Wallace noticed a perplexed woman squirming in her seat. "But why emotions?" she interrupted. "How does getting to know Jesus' emotional life matter? I mean, if I let myself act on all the emotions I feel, I would be divorced, jobless and alone! It's like we're making Jesus into a big drama king!"<sup>2</sup>

As we listen to Jesus in Gethsemane, we're not watching a big drama king. We're watching a Savior who, in his humanity, was emotionally real with those around him, including God. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he says to Peter, James, and John (v. 34). Or as Eugene Peterson renders it, "He plunged into a sinkhole of dreadful agony. He told them, 'I feel bad enough right now to die. Stay here and keep vigil with me.'" All he was asking was that they accompany him and be with him in this experience of fear and anguish. It's not as if he was expecting them to face what only he could face or to

do what only he could do. All he wanted was for them to be present to his agony. He wanted them to be nearby, to be alert, to be prayerful.

Maybe this would be a good time for them to remember some of Jesus' own words in the prayer he had taught them. "Our Father in heaven, . . . Your kingdom come, your will be done. . . . Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." After all, it's one thing to learn those words in Discipleship 101 class. But it's another thing to actually implement them in the face of suffering and testing, including the likelihood of death. But that's exactly what Jesus is doing in Gethsemane. He's showing them that prayer is about more than just speaking. It's also about doing. So Jesus enacts those petitions that he had regularly prayed. He holds nothing back in presenting his heart to the Father. He openly and honestly asks to be rescued from suffering and crucifixion. He pleads to be delivered from evil. But he also prays that the kingdom will come, that his Father's will be accomplished. And this obedience to the will of God is the essence of the kingdom.

John Stott once wrote:

Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will upon God, or for bending his will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to his. It is by prayer that we seek God's will, embrace it and align ourselves with it. Every true prayer is a variation on the theme, "Your will be done." Our Master taught us to say this in the pattern prayer he gave us, and added the supreme example of it in Gethsemane.<sup>3</sup>

The kingdom of God came, and God rescued us from sin and death, because Jesus embodied the Lord's Prayer by staying the course and following the way to the cross. That's where the victory won through anguished prayer in Gethsemane became victory for us. As Philip Yancey has put it, "When Jesus prayed to the one who could save him from death, he did not get that salvation; he got instead the salvation of the world."<sup>4</sup>

He got your salvation and my salvation. And he didn't get it by protecting himself but by risking himself. He didn't get it by securing himself but by sacrificing himself. He didn't get it by clinging to his life but by letting go of his life. There in Gethsemane, this letting go is fearful and spiritually agonizing, because of what Jesus is facing. Remember that Jesus will be bearing the judgment that we rightfully deserve. He will be taking upon himself the wrath of God against our sin. Jesus will be experiencing the full onslaught of sin, death, and the devil, so that God can triumph over all that resists or rejects his life-giving reign. No wonder Jesus prays that this cup of suffering will be taken away from him.

Gethsemane is no serenity garden. It's a spiritual battleground. It's an on-your-knees, face-to-the-ground kind of place. It's a garden where the only thing flowing are the tears of a Savior who's on the verge of being arrested and executed. Preacher Haddon Robinson has said:

Had I had been there in that hour of his agony and watched the way he suffered, I would have despaired of the future. I think I would have said, "If he's behaving this way when all he's doing is praying, what in the world is he going to do when he faces a crisis? It's too bad he can't be like his three sleeping friends. They found a spiritual peace in the midst of the storm." But when the crisis came, Jesus went to the cross in triumph. It was his three friends who fell back and fell away.<sup>5</sup>

No wonder Jesus has to repeatedly admonish them to wake up. He exhorts them, and us, to be watchful, alert, and prayerful. Otherwise, we fall away from our Lord and abandon the way of the cross. When he says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34), we resist, especially when we see

exactly what it involves for him, and what it involves for us. For us, it doesn't involve the kind of torturous death that he experienced, doing for us and for the world what only he could do. But it still involves getting up under your own cross, your own instrument of death, and going to the grave with him. The alternative is to protect yourself, to keep your life for yourself, rather than letting go of your life for him and for the gospel.

Gethsemane shows us that the advance toward God's kingdom coming, and God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven, involved Jesus losing his life rather than saving it. Through spiritual wrestling, alertness of soul, and fierce prayer, Jesus took a critical step in letting go of his life so that you and I could gain kingdom life.

We know, from many different kinds of experiences, that progress in life often involves letting go. Sometimes it has to do with negative and painful emotions that need to be processed and turned loose. Things like anger or jealousy or hatred. Sometimes it has to do with memories of the way things used to be in your life, your health, your job, your church, and you struggle with not clinging to the past. Sometimes it has to do with sins that need to be faced and confessed, and shame or guilt that need to be relinquished. Sometimes it has to do with money or possessions where we need to loosen our grip and release them into other purposes. Sometimes it has to do with a person in your life, maybe a spouse who has died or a child who has now grown up, and you're learning more about what it means to let go and move forward into new dimensions of your relationship with them. When we aim to make progress toward a more fruitful and meaningful future, we often find that the path takes us through various forms of letting go.

This dynamic of letting go, and in the process gaining something more, is critical to being a follower of Jesus. In other words, making progress as a disciple, and growing stronger in your faith, require that day by day, instead of clutching your life, you turn it loose and entrust yourself to the will of our good and trustworthy Father, whose Son has already traveled the full path to the cross, including that anguished visit to Gethsemane.

I like the way one preacher has put it when he says of following Jesus: "Time and again, from womb to tomb, you have to let go. And to let go is to die a little."<sup>6</sup> Dying to sin. Dying to self. Staying alert to all those daily ways that Jesus calls you to give yourself to others and to empty yourself for the sake of God's kingdom.

Remember that it takes vigilance to live this way. If you're not careful, spiritual slumber can set in. Before you know it, you might doze off into a way of life where you're more interested in securing your own kingdom than in promoting God's kingdom. You might drift off into a vision of life where the objective is your own glory rather than God's glory. You might become a drowsy disciple who has forgotten what it means to make sacrifices for the sake of Christ. So keep watch. Don't let Jesus find you snoozing, especially when the stakes are so high and eternal gain is on the line. Instead, take your life, and make it a prayer that says to our Father, "Not what I will, but what you will."

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Buchanan, "Jesus Wept." Christianity Today website. March 5, 2001. Accessed March 14, 2018 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/march5/4.60.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Wallace, "Rethinking Jesus in Lent: What He Can Teach Us About Emotional Authenticity." Day 1 website. March 7, 2013. Accessed March 14, 2018 <[http://day1.org/4714-rethinking\\_jesus\\_in\\_lent\\_what\\_he\\_can\\_teach\\_us\\_about\\_emotional\\_authenticity](http://day1.org/4714-rethinking_jesus_in_lent_what_he_can_teach_us_about_emotional_authenticity)>.

<sup>3</sup> John Stott, *The Letters of John*.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Yancey, "Jesus' Unanswered Prayers." Christianity Today website. February 9, 1998. Accessed March 14, 2018 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/february9/8t2152.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> Haddon Robinson, "The Disciple's Prayer." Preaching Today website. Accessed March 15, 2018 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2005/august/117.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Walter J. Burghardt, "Listen! Let Go! Laugh!" *The Living Pulpit* (January-March 2000) 40.