

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
October 3, 2021

## **Jesus Prayed**

Luke 6:12-16

Last Sunday we approved the Nominating Committee's recommendations for our church's officers and committees for 2021-2022. Now that we know who's serving where in our congregation's life and mission, we can move forward with collaborating and making plans. But in the midst of the recruiting, reporting, and voting, it's easy to lose sight of how essential prayer is in bringing together the people of God for the work of God. We can't just seek out one another. Most of all, we have to seek the Lord.

That's what Jesus is doing in today's text from Luke. Jesus' ministry has expanded, and the time has come to appoint some of his disciples to a special role as "apostles," which means "ones sent." Commissioning these individuals is a critical step in our Lord's work. So before sending them out, Jesus goes up on a mountain and holds an all-night prayer session, which tells us that this is more than just a human resources issue. Granted, the mission has become too big for one person, but the challenge can't be met by simply staffing up. The arrival of God's reign requires not just more people power but divine power. And prayer is essential to how Jesus seeks provision, guidance, and power from above.

We see this at various points in Jesus' life and ministry. At his baptism, Jesus was in prayer (3:21). At the peak of his popularity, Jesus withdrew for prayer (5:16). Prior to choosing the Twelve, Jesus spent the night in prayer (6:12). When Jesus asked his disciples who they say he is, he was in the midst of prayer (9:18). When Jesus went up on the mountain and was transfigured, it was in the context of prayer (9:28). When Jesus led his followers to the Mount of Olives, prior to his arrest, he knelt down in anguished prayer (22:41-46). At so many significant turning points in the story of our Lord, we encounter him praying. Jesus knew that every moment, and especially these critical moments, had to be elevated into the larger purpose of God for the restoration of his people and the redemption of the world.

S. D. Gordon has captured it well:

How much prayer meant to Jesus! It was not only his regular habit, but his resort in every emergency, however slight or serious. When perplexed he prayed. When hard pressed by work he prayed. When hungry for fellowship he found it in prayer. He chose his associates and received his messages upon his knees. If tempted, he prayed. If criticized, he prayed. If fatigued in body or wearied in spirit, he had recourse to his one un failing habit of prayer. Prayer brought him unmeasured power at the beginning, and kept the flow unbroken and undiminished. There was no emergency, no difficulty, no necessity, no temptation that would not yield to prayer.<sup>1</sup>

In today's Scripture reading from Acts, also written by Luke, Barnabas and Saul get commissioned for the work of the gospel. And as with Jesus and the appointing of the Twelve, so here in the story of the first Christian communities, messengers of the good news get sent out in the context of prayer. The story of Jesus moves forward in the story of his followers. A praying Christ sets the pattern and the practice for a praying church.

Prayer is essential to the life and mission of our church. As in the story of Jesus' life and ministry, so in the unfolding narrative of our congregation, prayer is always there. There are times when the urgency and necessity of prayer becomes more evident, such as when we're selecting leaders, or making a major decision about our building, or discussing significant changes to our programs, or facing a time of great suffering or sorrow. At those points in our journey, we're even more intentional and focused about getting on our knees before the Lord to seek his power, guidance, and provision for our fellowship.

But in between those types of events and experiences, prayer is always part of the rhythm of our life together as Christ's people. We don't just pray when the moment is critical and the stakes are high. We also pray when things seem pretty routine and ordinary, when the machinery of church life seems to be running according to plan. Whatever the circumstances, prayer is always embedded in both our gathering and our going. It sustains us and keeps us connected to the Lord, who is himself the source of our life and mission.

Jedd Medefind is president of a Christian ministry for orphans. A few years ago, 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.<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup>

When Luke says, in the chapter before today's text, that "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (5:16), that's not a throwaway line or an attempt at filling in some narrative space. Luke doesn't mean that occasionally things got so intense and demanding that Jesus decided he needed to retreat from the crowds. Instead, this was a rhythm of life 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. So it should be for you and me, as individual believers and as a congregation.

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?"

Whatever you're doing to work for the Lord and promote his kingdom, within the life of our church and beyond it in the larger world, prayer must always be there. Prayer needs to be constantly running in the background of your life and ministry. Sometimes prayer will take the form of seeking God together through corporate worship. Sometimes prayer will take the form of personal, more private devotions where you're in communion with God. Sometimes prayer will take the form of joining with others in a small group as you open the Scriptures, listening to and responding to God's word. Sometimes prayer will take the form of steady conversation with God and fellowship with God during the course of the whole

day. Moment by moment, day by day, kingdom living and kingdom mission require persistent prayerfulness.

I imagine that when the time came for their commissioning service, Peter, Andrew, James, John, and the other eight sat reverently on the front pew, their families seated in the rows behind them. Bartholomew had some skills in music, so he led everyone in singing "We've a Story to Tell." Then, before the ceremony for the laying on of hands, Jesus gave them a sermon, including a charge to keep. That charge included exhortations about the urgency of their message, instructions about receiving the hospitality of others, and reminders that God's kingdom would prevail. Jesus promised these Twelve that their ministry would bear fruit. But he also warned them about the prospect of resistance and rejection. So in order to complete their assignment, they would need to stay connected to power that was greater than just themselves. Then Jesus closed his message by admonishing them to pray. If prayer was the means by which his own ministry moved along, then it would have to be that way for them, his messengers, as well.

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."<sup>4</sup>

The shade provided by Jesus' ministry had roots in his prayerful, personal engagement with God. And Jesus' ongoing kingdom ministry, which we're called and sent to be part of, requires the same deep roots of us. Those roots grow and develop through participation in Jesus' ongoing life of prayer.

It's no wonder that a few chapters later in Luke's Gospel, while Jesus was praying, one of his disciples, speaking for all of them, said, "Lord, teach us to pray" (11:1). And Jesus' response to this request contains what we call the Lord's Prayer. So today, as we reflect on the prayerfulness of Jesus, in the selection of the Twelve and throughout his ministry, I invite you to join me in an exploration and experience of the Lord's Prayer. Beginning next Sunday and going through mid-November, I'll be preaching a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. I look forward to having you participate as we dive deeper into this enduring prayer that captures the heart and work of Jesus Christ in our lives and in the world.

<sup>1</sup> S. D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks on Prayer*. Quoted in *Today*, Vol. 30, No. 5 (March 21, 1986) 24.

<sup>2</sup> Jedd Medefind, "The Activist Soul: Why the Fight for Social Justice Must Start Within." *Christianity Today* (July/August 2017) 72.

<sup>3</sup> Medefind, "The Activist Soul," 73.

<sup>4</sup> Zachary W. Eswine, *Sensing Jesus: Life and Ministry as a Human Being* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013) 57.