



Take Another Look

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Luke 22:39-42

And [Jesus] came out, and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place he said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." And [Jesus] withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, "Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done."

It was bedtime. His daddy told him to go to bed. He didn't want to go to bed, but the six year old got up without too much protest and headed for the stairs. Just before he put his foot on the first step, he turned around and announced to his daddy and mommy, "Well, I'm going off to pray now. Anybody want anything?"

That's one way to look at prayer - like it's a mail-order catalogue. You can pick out the thing you want, send off your request, and wait for the UPS man to deliver it in ten to fourteen business days.

That's really the first way most people look at prayer. It's a system of asking and receiving. It's like going to the shopping mall, climbing up on Santa's knee, reciting the names of all the things on a long list of Christmas present wants, and then opening up the packages on Christmas morning. It's asking and receiving. It's getting what's wanted out of God.

That's the first way people look at prayer. It seems to work for a while, especially if you're only six years old. But over time, people usually learn that just because they ask for something doesn't mean they're going to get it - especially when they're asking for something in a prayer.

When they don't get what they want, when their prayers don't bring in the anticipated reward, when God doesn't give them their way - that's when people take a second look at prayer.

On second look, for a lot of people, prayer doesn't seem to mean a thing.

Back in 1988 at the Democratic National Convention, a curious episode unfolded right on national television. When the evening session opened, a minister was brought in to offer an opening prayer. The television cameras zoomed in on Rev. Jesse Jackson. He wasn't the minister praying. He was a political candidate. He was standing on the edge of the speaker's platform. He bowed his head as the prayer began.

Right then, Connie Chung, then of CBS News, walked up to Jackson, telling the television audience that she was going to ask Jesse his opinion on some political maneuver that was going on behind the scenes. Jesse held up his hand to her, as if to say, "Not now." But Connie wanted her interview. She was persistent. She kept talking over the minister's prayer. Finally Jesse raise his head, looked at her, and said, "Please wait; we're praying now."

That was news to her. She had an important question that needed to be answered. That prayer didn't mean a thing to her.

That's the way a lot of people look at prayer. Prayer doesn't mean a thing to them.

There's a third way some people look at prayer. They don't think prayer is just an exercise in asking for things. They don't think prayer is irrelevant. They just don't think about praying. They're too darned busy to pray.

They've got busy lives. They've got too much to do and too little time to do it. They can't be expected to spend any of their precious minutes in prayer. It's a luxury they just can't afford.

They're busy people - like Martin Luther. He was a busy fellow. You remember Martin Luther. He was a monk whose act of defiance against the Roman Catholic Church in 1517 launched the Protestant Reformation. He was busy.

He preached for his congregation. He wrote enough books to fill a good-sized library. He corresponded widely with leading figures throughout Europe. He had to defend himself in several religious and political controversies. He married a former nun, become a devoted husband and a doting father to a large number of children.

And in his spare time, he was busy changing the history of the Western world as the leader of the Reformation. He was a busy fellow.

One day a Connie Chung of her day asked Luther a question. “How do you do it all,” the reporter asked, “how can you find enough time in the day to do it all?”

Luther answered, “I couldn’ t do any of it, if I didn’ t spend the first four hours of every day in prayer.”

As busy as he was, Luther thought prayer was important enough to set aside time every day - four hours of time every day - to prayer. Doesn’ t that make you wonder, how come you’ re too busy to pray?

Just as physical exercise brings energy and flexibility to your body, prayer is the spiritual exercise that brings spiritual energy to your soul. The more you pray, the more in-tune you will be to the Holy Spirit.

I want you to take another look at prayer, but this time, take a look at what Jesus thought about prayer. When you look at what Jesus thought about prayer, the first thing you’ ll see is that Jesus made time to pray.

Take, for instance, this little episode in today’ s scripture lesson. Here toward the end of the Gospel of Luke, we find this story when Jesus made time to pray. He made time, even though he was very busy. You might even think he might have been pre-occupied with everything else that was going on in his life.

When we come across Jesus in this story, it is one of the most anguished and intense moments of his life. Jesus had just finished hosting his last supper with his disciples where he had told them some disturbing news. He had walked out from the city walls of Jerusalem, climbed up the Mount of Olives, out to the Garden of Gethsemane.

He knew what was going to happen there. He knew it was just a matter of moments before he would be arrested, just a few hours before his trial, just the night before his death. He knew all of that, but he made time to pray.

This scripture story tells us that praying “was his custom.” That lets us know that Jesus made prayer a regular habit in his life. Prayer was part of the rhythm of his daily living. The scripture doesn’ t tell us if he was like Martin Luther - that he spent four hours every morning praying - but the point is made: Jesus spent some time every day in prayer.

And if you’ re going to follow Jesus, you should, too.

Prayer, just like any talent, has to be regularly practiced.

- People say you never forget how to ride a bicycle. That may be true, but if you haven't been on a bicycle for twenty-five years, you won't be able to hop up on top and speed down a road, competing in a race, and not have a wobble or a fall.

- People say driving a car is automatic. That may be true, but if you haven't been behind the wheel of a car in ten years, you won't be able to slide in behind the wheel and safely maneuver that car at high speed in dangerous blizzard conditions without a slip or a slide.

- You can't just summon up the quick instincts and skills you need for these types of tasks without some regular and frequent practice.

That's the way it is with prayer. You can't just start praying after years of neglect and feel like God is really going to pay attention to you or help you out. Rusty prayer certainly is better than no prayer, but it probably can't get you through a crisis.

If you want your prayers to be life-saving and life-changing, you have to lay a foundation for it through patient and persistent prayer over many years. You have to build a foundation of a structured prayer life so your prayers will be strong enough to withstand life's most devastating storms.

The first thing you notice in today's scripture is that Jesus made time for prayer. The second thing you notice is that Jesus approached God honestly.

Jesus made no secret about the way he felt. The scripture says he prayed "earnestly," to the point where "his sweat became like great drops of blood..." When he prayed, Jesus didn't try to hide the way he felt.

Neither should you. Don't bother to sugar-coat your emotions in front of God. Don't try to fool him by using fancy words and impressive statements. Just be honest. Be yourself.

Now, you can hide from other people. You can put on a face, and put up a front, and put on an act. You can fool your friends, and hide your weaknesses, and disguise your fears - and nobody you know will suspect a thing.

But, you can't hide from God. You can't fool him, either.

Jesus didn't. Why should you? Look at how Jesus prayed: he didn't hold back a thing from God. Jesus knew, and you should know, that God already knows you through and through. He knows what's in your heart. God already knows what's on your mind. God already knows what you want, before you say it.

Jesus was honest. He told God exactly what he wanted. “Remove this cup from me,” he prayed.

Take a look at what he said next. He said, “Not my will, but thine be done.” That’s the third thing you can learn about prayer: it’s coming to terms with God’s answer. And that means listening.

A lot of people think that when they pray, they’ve got to spend all their time talking to God. They think they’ve got to keep the conversation going. So, they keep up a constant chatter. They think if they can use some flowery words and some religious sounding terms - they think that’ll all be in their favor.

But when it comes to prayer, God’s not really going to be impressed with your vocabulary or syntax. God thinks it’s much more important for you to spend more time listening for God’s answer.

One reason why people sometimes come away from prayer feeling empty is because they’ve spent all their prayer-time talking -

- they tell God what they want,
- they plead for what they need,
- they fill up all the empty moments with words and tears and begging,
- what they forget all about is to spend any time listening.

If you want your prayers to make a difference, you’ve got to listen.

Wait for God. Listen for his answer. It’s a hard thing to do, because your mind is going to fill-up with thoughts of things you have to do, of things you forgot to do, of things that are bothering you. You’re going to get an itch that demands to be scratched. You’re going to have to climb a hundred barriers before you can empty out your mind and listen for God’s answer.

Jesus struggled that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. He had to fight his own inclinations and his own desires. But, he fought and won, so he could listen. That’s when his answer came. It probably wasn’t the answer he wanted, but it was the answer he got. And, he said, “Not my will but thine be done.”

When you take a look at that, you’ll understand that that is the end of every true prayer. The purpose of every prayer is not to get what you want, but to understand what God wants for you.

When you take another look at what Jesus had to say about prayer in today’s scripture, there’s a fourth lesson you can learn. Jesus told his disciples, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.”

When the soldiers came for Jesus, Jesus knew his disciples were going to be tempted to save their own skins. He was right. They all ran off.

Jesus knows enough about you to know when the going gets tough, that's the first thing you want to do, too. You're tempted to live for yourself. You're tempted to plan your escape route. You're tempted to watch out for number one.

Living life is risky business, and life throws a lot of temptations your way:

- you're tempted by materialism to live for your possessions,
- tempted by hedonism to live for your pleasure,
- tempted by nationalism to hate your enemies,
- tempted by expediency to compromise your integrity,
- tempted by pride to live for yourself,
- tempted by tradition to resist change,
- tempted by fear to hide in a closet.

There are a lot of temptations out there pulling at you. They want to pull you away from God. They want to build barriers to keep you from knowing Jesus Christ. They want to trick you into thinking you can make it without God. They want to make you think you're more important than everyone else.

That's why Jesus told you to pray and ask God to keep you away from temptation.

A one year old girl was at a party with her parents. She hadn't been walking around too long by herself. She was still delighted with her new-found mobility.

She moved around the party room and discovered that it was full of tall people, a lot of people she didn't know towering over her. She would go off exploring, as children do, but every minute or so she would come back to her parents. Off she would go for a minute, then peek back to see her parents. She kept checking back, just to make sure they were still there. She didn't want to wander too far off. She didn't want to lose touch with her parents.

When you take a look at prayer, that's the kind of thing you can see. You wander off in your daily affairs, but when you pray, you're checking in with God.

Prayer keeps you from straying too far away from God.

Prayer keeps you in touch with his will for your life.

Prayer gives you a reassurance that you're still safe and secure.

Prayer helps you balance your pursuit of happiness with your pursuit of holiness.

That's what prayer can do. It's your conscience checker, your reality tester, your lifeline anchored to God's will.

Daily prayer gives you strength for your journey.

Isn't it time you took another look at your personal prayer life? When you do, you'll see that prayer is a whole lot more than just asking for something you want and hoping you're going to get it.

You'll see that prayer can make a real difference in your every day living.

You'll see that regular prayer can change your outlook, your disposition, and your old habits.

If you pray with the conviction of Jesus,

- with the regularity of Jesus,

- and with the attitude of Jesus -

- your prayers will change your life for the better!

Because, when you're connected with God in prayer, that's when you will know that blessed assurance that your God will be with you when you're lost in your own Gethsemane.

Your God will pick you up when you fall. He will prop you up when you're weak. He'll guide you through every valley of doubt and despair.

When you pray every day, your God will strengthen you for the battle ahead. All of that, and so much more will be yours - when you pray!