

PRAYING UNDER PRESSURE

Scriptures: Matthew 26:36-46; Matthew 26:31-35

This sermon has one point, which is better than no point. I'm going to tell you the point of this sermon right at the beginning. That way if you fall asleep, like the disciples did, you won't miss it. Here is the point of this sermon: If you don't stick with Jesus when it is easy, you won't be able to when it is hard. If you don't practice the presence of God when times are good, you won't experience the presence of God when times are tough.

That is the point. Now I am going to tell you some stories. The first story is about Peter. You have to admire Peter's confidence. In our first scripture lesson at the last supper Jesus tells his disciples that when he is arrested they will all desert him. But Peter says, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you. ... Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." Yeah for Peter!

But look what happens. They leave the last supper and go to a place called Gethsemane. Jesus says to the disciples, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." This should put to rest once and for all the idea that Christians should never be sad, upset, or shaken. Jesus was sad, upset, and shaken. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus experienced terminal grief. All he asked is that the disciples would stay awake with him and pray.

But they fell asleep. Admittedly they were probably tired, but do you think Peter or the other disciples would have fallen asleep if they knew that Jesus was going to be arrested at any moment? Would you be able to sleep if you knew at any moment the police would come and break down your door? I don't think so. Peter falls asleep because he is relaxed. He thinks they are safe. He does not realize that one of the darkest moments in his life is just around the corner. He sleeps, because he sees no urgency to stay awake and pray.

Jesus comes back and finds them sleeping. Then he then says to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?" This is the same Peter that vowed that he would never desert Jesus—that he would die with Jesus. At this point he cannot even stay awake with Jesus for an hour. He can't even make it through a church service.

Jesus says to Peter and the other disciples: "Stay awake and pray that you may not enter into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak." That certainly describes Peter. Peter claims that he will die with Jesus, but before morning, before the rooster crows, Peter denies knowing Jesus three times. I think the three times Peter denies Jesus is anticipated by the three times he falls asleep. If you can't stick with Jesus when it is easy, you won't be able to stick with Jesus when it is hard.

Now let me tell you a second story: the story of Jesus. What an amazing prayer Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane. He says, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." Jesus has already told the disciples three times that he is going to suffer and die, and now he is asking God to stop this from happening. Is it okay to ask God to change plans? Is it okay to ask God to spare you, to give you a break, to save you from some inevitable disaster? You bet

it is. Jesus did. This is Jesus at his most human. Jesus is scared. Jesus is anxious. Jesus is dreading what is coming, and he will do almost anything to avoid it—almost anything. He adds a very important caveat to his prayer. He says, “Yet, not what I want, but what you want.” Even though he is sick at the thought of what is coming, he says to God, “Thy will be done.”

How was Jesus able to pray like that under such circumstances? How could Jesus express such faith and commitment in such an anguish-filled situation? The answer is he practiced. He practiced praying like that. Did you notice the similarities between the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane and the Lord’s Prayer? In the agony of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, “My Father.” Where did Jesus learn to pray that way? He learned it from praying the Lord’s Prayer over and over with his disciples: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” In the darkest moment of his life Jesus could call God Father because he had practiced calling God Father.

The same is true when Jesus says, “Your will be done.” How could Jesus have the courage to say that in such a dire situation? Because he had practiced saying it in the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Even when Jesus says to the disciples, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial,” he is reminding them of the Lord’s Prayer. In Greek the word for “trial” is the same as the word for “temptation.” So basically Jesus is telling the disciples: “Pray that God will lead you not into temptation but will deliver you from evil.” He is reminding them of the Lord’s Prayer.

At the darkest moment of his life, Jesus could pray because he had practiced praying. If you practice the presence of God when times are easy, you will be able to experience the presence of God when times are tough.

One more story. This is about a man named Mike. I shared this story last fall, so many of you may remember it. Mike wrote an essay, a sort of spiritual autobiography of himself, in which he said,

Sunday school is where I first learned that God loved me. This was presented to me in the form of a song: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” ... At an early age I was also taught that Jesus died for my sins. In fact, he died on a cross for my sins, and three days after he died he came back to life. This was a little over my head at the time, but I went along with it because of Easter. I knew that Easter was intended to be about God and Jesus, but to a young child Easter is about a basket full of candy and an Easter egg hunt.

Mike goes on to tell about becoming an acolyte in church and later going through confirmation class and being confirmed. But then he started questioning. He writes,

I began to wonder why a god would want people to come to a building each week at the same time to worship him. ... Why did we recite the same prayers such as the Lord’s Prayer over and over again? Didn’t god listen the last time?

Eventually Mike drifted away from the church, and as a young adult he seldom attended. But near the end of his essay he tells about an experience he had rock climbing. He writes,

I was several hundred feet above the ground, perilously perched on the side of a rock wall. I had climbed myself into an area that was off the established route. Because of the extreme technical difficulty of the route that we were on, I was unable to retreat down in the same direction that I had climbed up. I was literally stuck. I couldn't go up, and I couldn't go down. My arms and legs began to shake out of exhaustion because I had been clinging onto the same miniscule holds for so long. Without really thinking about it, I began to pray. I didn't make any life changing promises. I simply followed my learned prayer pattern and asked God for help. I have no rational explanation for what occurred next, however, a sense of calm came over me. I felt as though a warm pressure was pushing against my back, and without hesitation I began to climb up another forty feet to the safety of a wide ledge.

The question that strikes me about this story is where did Mike learn to pray? Even more important, where did Mike learn that there is a God who listens to prayers, a God who cares about what happens to him? Mike learned about that from sitting in church and in Sunday School and from saying the Lord's Prayer every week. At the time it seemed like foolish repetition, but without realizing it Mike was training his soul for the time of crisis. He was practicing for the moment when he would need all the faith he had ever learned.

To experience the presence of God when times are tough, you have to practice the presence of God when times are easy. That is what Jesus did, and what Peter did not do.

I thought about that when I watched the NCAA basketball tournament last month. On several occasions in the NCCA tournament, games were decided on the last shot. Players took shots at the buzzer that decided whether they would win or lose, whether they would go to the Final Four or go home. I have often wondered, how did they make those shots under that kind of pressure? I would not have made those shots. I would not have attempted them. I would have passed the ball to someone else. But those players wanted the ball. The clock was ticking, the crowd was screaming, the other players on the bench were linking their arms as if in group prayer, and these players took the ball, pulled up, and shot a fifteen foot jump shot right through the net. How did they do that?

The answer is simple. They did it a thousand times before. They practiced those shots over and over, day after day, year after year, until those shots were second nature to them. So when the pressure was on, and the game was on the line, they did what they were accustomed to do. They made shots.

If you don't practice following Jesus when it is easy, you won't be able to when it is hard.

- Ken Onstot