

Series: Christmas and the Cross

Title: Lessons on Prayer from an Olive Garden

Text: Mark 14:32-42

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Verse 32

As the time of His death drew near, Jesus escaped to pray. Mark 14:32 reads, “Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he told his disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’” the word “then” continues the narrative from the previous verses. The events in our passage occurred after the Passover meal (Mark 14:22-26) and after Jesus’ prophesy concerning Peter’s upcoming denial (Mark 14:27-31). With the activities of a busy day behind Him, Jesus retreated to a solitary place for prayer.

Earlier in Mark’s gospel we saw Jesus make “his way to a deserted place” to pray (Mark 1:35 and 6:46).¹ On this occasion, Jesus went to a place called “Gethsemane.” Luke’s gospel tells us that Jesus regularly used the place for private prayer while in Jerusalem (Luke 22:39). His commitment to pray in the place was so customary that Judas knew it would provide an opportune time and place to betray Jesus (John 18:2).

The name “Gethsemane” was drawn from an Aramaic word that meant “olive press.”² The locale was found in the foothills of the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39), a place of eschatological significance in Old Testament prophecy (Zechariah 14:4). Gethsemane was three-fourths of a mile from the eastern walls of Jerusalem.³ In John 18:1, John seemed to indicate there was an olive garden located in the place in which Jesus prayed.⁴ Jesus’ prayer at Gethsemane was significant. It promoted His role as the Messiah who would deliver humanity from sin. It also provided powerful lessons for disciples on prayer. The author of Hebrews memorialized the prayer in our passage by saying, “During his earthly life, he offered prayers and appeals with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence” (Hebrews 5:7).

Verse 33

Mark 14:33 says, “He took Peter, James, and John with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.” As He retreated deeper into the garden for prayer, Jesus only took three of His closest disciples with Him. He left the other eight behind in the fringes of Gethsemane to “sit” (Mark 14:32). Why did He only take Peter, James, and John with Him? Well, on previous occasions in Mark’s gospel, we have seen Him rely on this inner circle on occasions that involved really important matters (Mark 5:37 and 9:2).⁵ Undoubtedly, the prayer session at hand was of great significance. It’s weightiness was on par with His miracles and the Transfiguration.

Notice Jesus’ agony in prayer. Mark used strong language to depict intense travail in our Lord’s soul. One has commented, “The language used here is very strong indeed; it conveys the idea of a man who is far away from home and feels abandoned, longing for companionship but finding none. It is clear that Jesus’ whole being was profoundly shaken as he began to feel the weight of his coming suffering.”⁶ The word translated “troubled” is one

¹ Schnabel, 362.

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 99.

³ Robertson, 211.

⁴ Brooks 233.

⁵ Schnabel, 362.

⁶ Ferguson, 239.

that is rendered “very heavy” by the King James Version of the Bible. The Greek word underlying English translations is one that literally meant “not at home” or “away from home.” It figuratively spoke of “intense discomfort”. It spoke of one being “excessively concerned.”⁷ One has attempted to encapsulate the agony of Jesus’ prayer by saying, “Horror and anguish overwhelmed him” as He prayed.⁸

What was the reason for our Lord’s anguish? Some may think His primary struggle was the prospect of the physical pain associated with the cross. It seems He was driven by a different sort of grief. The gospels reveal that He never cried out in agony over the physical tortures of Calvary. The only time He expressed pain was when He sensed separation from God. Remember Him crying out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Matthew 27:46). In order to make atonement for sin, Jesus had to be separated from God for sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). Such is what made the cross so horrific for our Lord. It is the reason He felt so “distressed and troubled” as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our Lord was “not at home” as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He undoubtedly felt homesickness for heaven because of the pending separation from God He would experience.⁹

Jesus dreaded the isolation from God He experienced at Golgotha, He also dreaded something else. He undoubtedly stood in disgust at the thought of becoming sin. Scripture teaches that Jesus became sin on our behalf at the cross. Can you imagine the horror our Lord must have had at such a prospect? He was the spotless Lamb of God. He never said, thought, or did anything that went against God’s revealed Word. He was pure and perfect. It must have been quite a strain for one with complete righteousness to embrace all the unrighteousness of human history. Ryle has commented, “It was a sense of the unutterable weight of our sins and transgressions which were then specially laid upon him. He was being ‘made a curse for us.’ He was bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows, according to the covenant he came on earth to fulfill.”¹⁰

Our Lord’s way of praying provided an important lesson for us. To pray powerful prayers, we must be honest with our emotions. There is no use in hiding how we feel. Strong supplications often contain strong shows of emotion. The one who effectively engages in intercession is one who bares his or her soul to the Lord. The prophet Jeremiah was a proponent in this regard. When he taught God’s people to pray during the horrific events associated with captivity, he said, “Arise, cry out in the night from the first watch of the night. Pour out your heart like water before the Lord’s presence. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children who are fainting from hunger at the head of every street” (Lamentations 2:19). Jeremiah knew what Jesus knew — to succeed in prayer, one must feel his or her emotions and one must deal with his or her emotions. One cannot hide his or her heart from the Lord, so why even try? The Lord takes great delight when we open our souls to Him and get real. In addition, such an honest and humble frame of mind gives us a posture in which we are ready to receive from the Lord. Learn to get in tune with your emotions. “Pour out your heart like water before the Lord’s presence.” Share your grief with the Him when you pray. Realize the Lord values openness and honesty when you seek His face (1 Samuel 1:16; Psalm 5:1-4; 1 Peter 5:7; and Philippians 4:6-7).

Verse 34

In verse 34, Jesus gave words to His emotional turmoil and asked His disciples to pray. He said, “I am deeply grieved to the point of death. Remain here and stay awake” (Mark 14:34).

⁷ Robertson, 212.

⁸ Brooks, 234.

⁹ Robertson, 212.

¹⁰ Ryle, 250.

Some see the Lord's words as containing a quotation of Psalm 42:5-6.¹¹ The language of the verse conveyed the idea that Jesus had sorrow so deep it felt like He was dying.¹² Why was He so grieved? He was overwhelmed with the prospect of enduring man's sin.

Our Lord's grief should remind us that our sin deeply grieves the heart of God.¹³ It is a hideous thing. It ruined God's original intent for creation, and it estranged humanity from its Creator (Genesis 3:8-24). Sin required a cost in the eyes of God — the sacrifice of His only Son. May we be gripped by the way in which sin, in God's eyes, is "sinful beyond measure" (Romans 7:13). May sins like materialism, lust, pornography, gossip, and unloving behavior be tragic in our eyes. They cost God's Son His life. They grieved Jesus, so may they grieve us as well.

Verse 35

Verse 35 described the content of Jesus' prayer, saying, "He went a little farther, fell to the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from him" (Mark 14:35). The term "hour" was one that was used figuratively of judgment in the ancient world. It appeared earlier in Mark 13:32 to speak of the judgment that will come upon the world at the end of time. As used in our current text, it alludes to the cross that awaited Jesus (John 12:23 and 27; Mark 14:41).

Jesus prayed, "if it were possible," that the Heavenly Father would allow such an hour to "pass from him." Some believe Jesus was tempted by Satan in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is not too unreasonable to think such a temptation might have taken place. Our Lord was previously tempted by the Devil in Mark 1:12-13. On this occasion, it seems that Jesus faced an allurements to back away from His destiny on the cross. Since Genesis 3:15, Satan has strategized to undo God's plan for human redemption (Genesis 4:8 and 6:1-2; Matthew 2:13).

Our Lord's prayer should not be seen in a negative light. Our Lord did not sin by expressing His dread of the cross. His prayer simply shows us that He indeed embraced manhood on our behalf. Though He was fully God, He was also fully man. As a human, He dreaded the thought of the punishment and suffering that awaited Him. One has commented on His prayer, saying, "The prayer is simply an expression of the real humanity of Jesus, which is as necessary a part of his nature as his deity."¹⁴ If Jesus would not have embraced manhood on our behalf, if He would not have suffered as a human, we would have not deliverance from our sins.

Verse 36

In verse 36, Mark gave a direct quotation of Jesus' prayer: "And he said, 'Abba, Father! All things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will'" (Mark 14:36). The title "Abba" reminds us that prayer is a relational activity. The English rendering of the moniker is not a translation; instead, it is a transliteration of a word that Hebrew kids would have used in their prayers.¹⁵ Perhaps the term of address was similar to our modern "daddy."¹⁶ The word showed that prayer involves the connection of one's heart and soul to the heart of God.

¹¹ Schnabel, 362.

¹² Schnabel, 363.

¹³ Ryle, 250.

¹⁴ Brooks, 234.

¹⁵ Robertson, 384.

¹⁶ Brooks, 234.

Jesus knew He had the privilege of such relational connectivity with the Lord. He knew the Father heard Him (John 11:41-42). He was aware that His bond with the Father gave Him access to the Father through prayer (John 17:21). As a result, He had confidence in praying.

Whenever we pray, we have the opportunity of having such a relational bond with the Heavenly Father. Such truth is found in the first part of the Lord's Prayer. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He said, "Therefore, you should pray like this: Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9). Paul touched on this reality when writing to the Romans. In talking about prayer, He used the same language Jesus used in the Garden of Gethsemane, saying, "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Romans 8:15). Paul also highlighted the relational nature of Christian prayer when writing to the Galatians. He said, "And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba, Father!'" (Galatians 4:6).

After beseeching the Lord from a posture of relationship, Jesus made a plain request. He said, "All things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me." At the front of His request, Jesus made an assertion concerning the nature of God. In saying "all things are possible for you," He affirmed the omnipotence of God, a doctrine He affirmed earlier in Mark's gospel (Mark 10:27). If one wants to see abundant fruit from abounding prayer in his or her life, one must have faith, believing God can do the impossible (James 1:6). Jesus taught earlier in Mark's gospel on the importance of such faith in praying (Mark 11:23-26).

After affirming the power of God, Jesus made His simple request — "Take this cup from me." Throughout the Biblical narrative, a "cup" is often seen as a symbol of Divine wrath (Isaiah 51:17; Jeremiah 25:17; Ezekiel 23:33; and Habakkuk 2:16).¹⁷ Jesus gave us the meaning of His proverbial "cup" when He instituted the Lord's Supper a few verses earlier (Mark 14:23-24). Our Lord's request showed what He really dreaded about the cross. He was apprehensive about bearing God's wrath for sin. He knew He would have to experience alienation from God on behalf of humankind (Matthew 27:46). Sensing the burden of pending separation, He made a simple, heartfelt request. He asked God to remove the cup of suffering that awaited Him.

In our Lord's request, we find a lesson for our prayer lives. Prayer should involve asking. In fact, one could argue that one has not really prayed until one has asked for something from God. Jesus showed this is true through both His lifestyle and the lessons He taught. When teaching His disciples to pray, He said, "Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). If you want to see abundant fruit from abounding prayer in your life, make sure you actually ask God for things when you pray. Get direct and get specific. Remember, many believers have not because they ask not (James 4:2).

Jesus' mode of praying showed the importance of asking in prayer, but it did much more. It also showed the importance of praying in alignment with God's will. Note the way in which Jesus said, "Not what I will, but what you will." As one hundred percent God and one hundred percent man, the human part of Jesus needed to submit to the will of God (John 6:38) in order for the plan of redemption to be accomplished. Such a reality did not diminish His Divine nature. It was just a plain fact that resulted from what theologians call "the hypostatic union."¹⁸

Maybe there was a subtle lesson for Mark's original readers in Jesus' prayer. Remember that many of them were facing persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. Perhaps some were struggling with how to pray. Was it wrong to ask for deliverance from martyrdom. Jesus showed that believers should be resigned to the will of God first of all. One may not know what the Lord desires in certain situations in life. It is best policy to simply pray for the Lord's leadership.

¹⁷ Ferguson, 240.

¹⁸ Ryle, 252.

If Jesus prayed with an eye on God's will, we should too. In all of our intercessions and supplications, we should seek after God's purposes for our lives. When our supplications and intercession are in alignment with the Lord's Divine purposes, we can expect a response. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:14).

Some within the modern Word of Faith movement are known for their unhealthy emphasis on praying in faith. They have actually cast aspersions at times on those who mimic Jesus' prayer in our verse. The thinking goes that one should not put a condition on one's prayers by using phrases like "if it is your will." Many within the Word of Faith movement believe that such expectations and caveats are rooted in a lack of faith.

Such man-made teaching is contrary to Jesus' prayer practices. From our Lord we gain a solid precedent for our personal intercessions. Sometimes we won't know what to pray for, or how we ought to pray. In seasons, we may feel like Paul did when he wrote to the Philippians "torn between the two" (Philippians 1:23), unable to discern God's will in a matter. It is okay on such occasions to express our confusion and our desires in an honest fashion. It is also permissible to simply ask the Lord to accomplish His will. Did not Jesus pray in this way? Know this — the Lord often uses such openness and honesty to get us to the place of surrender. When you pray, be real. If you are struggling to know God's will, admit it. Tell God about your confusion. He will honor and bless such authenticity. He will lead you to His will.

Verse 37

After praying for a while, Jesus went to check on Peter, James, and John. What He found discouraged Him. Mark records, "Then he came and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, "Simon, are you sleeping? Couldn't you stay awake one hour?" (Mark 14:37). The disciples failed to pray because they were sleepy. In some ways, we can't really fault them. It was late, probably near midnight. They had endured a long and exhausting day. A few hours earlier, they had eaten a large meal (Mark 14:12-26). The desire for sleep was natural. However, the need of the hour required prayer. Jesus had warned them that watchfulness was important (Mark 14:34). There are times for sleep and times for prayer. On the occasion at hand, the disciples needed to pray.

Perhaps the three disciples would not have failed if they would have encouraged one another. The reference to "them" may seem insignificant, but it wasn't. Mark was intentional to place emphasis on the disciples' need for corporate prayer amongst the three disciples. The narrative shows us the importance of prayer partners in our lives. As believers, we need the encouragement that comes from the body of Christ in order to excel in all areas of Christian virtue (Hebrews 10:24-25). Prayer is no exception in this matter. If we want to develop strong prayer lives, we must lean on others. Peter, James, and John could have found strength to stay awake if they would have held each other accountable.

The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) teaches us that this is true. Think of the way in which that prayer implements first-person plural pronouns — "our," "us," and "we." Our individualistic worldview in the West causes us to overlook the significance of those pronouns. Jesus taught us to pray with one another in mind because prayer isn't a solo sport. Sure, we should regularly have a time for private praying (Matthew 6:6); however, praying with others is critical to our spiritual health. When we regularly pray with prayer partners, we will be more likely to remain committed to intercession and supplication.

Notice that Jesus, in rebuking His disciples, referred to Peter as "Simon." The term of address was significant. The Lord intentionally called the disciple by his pre-conversion name. (John 1:42). In doing so, He subtly showed that prayerlessness is a mark of the unconverted. People who don't know God don't pray. Such a reality should shake modern believers from their spiritual slumber.

Jesus faulted His disciples for their failure to "stay awake one hour." The mention of a timeframe demonstrates how important the clock is in relation to faithful and effective praying. The saints in Scripture regularly show that strong prayers keep an eye on time (Daniel 6:10 and

Mark 1:35). If we want to be prayer warriors, we must be conscientious and diligent in this area. Some object to keeping track of how much time they spend in prayer out of a fear of legalism. Such a concern is shortsighted. Did not Jesus rebuke His disciples for their inability to pray a certain amount of time? How many modern disciples would be guilty of the same negligence? How many nowadays have experience in praying for an hour at a time? Have you ever spent that amount time of prayer in the span of one day? If He stood before you today, would Jesus need to rebuke you for prayerlessness?

Verse 38

After rebuking His disciples for their lack of vigilance, Jesus instructed them, saying, “Stay awake and pray so that you won’t enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38). The command to “stay awake” was a command for one to remain alert.¹⁹ In light of the coming temptation to deny Jesus (Mark 14:27-31, 50, and 66-72), the disciples needed spiritual vigilance. Judas had already betrayed the Lord (14:17-21) and sin was lurking at the door. If the disciples didn’t stand on guard, they would likely fail.

The word translated “pray” is the general term used for prayer in the New Testament. It is the word that was often used for drawing near to a deity. In the original language of our text, Mark used a present imperative verb. The tense and mood called for a continual attitude of prayer.²⁰ Jesus’ instruction reminds us that Christian prayer is to be an ongoing and habitual thing in the lives of disciples. The New Testament teaches us to “pray constantly” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We are to “Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request” (Ephesians 6:18). If we want to experience the life-changing power of intercessions and supplications, we must make prayer a habit-of-life type of thing.

The words “so that” form a statement of purpose. They reveal the reason why the disciples needed to remain watchful in prayer. Jesus’ instruction to His disciples teaches us that we are to regularly pray regarding potential areas of spiritual and moral failure in our own lives. Do we not see a pattern for such praying in the Lord’s Prayer? Jesus has taught us to regularly pray, “And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:13). As Christ followers, we should be careful to consistently pray for our weaknesses and struggles. We must regularly be on guard against spiritual failure. We all need spiritual alertness in life. Prayer is a sure way of cultivating a spirit of spiritual preparedness in the Christian life (Ephesians 6:18 and Colossians 4:2).

In instructing His disciples, Jesus made comment on the roles of “the spirit” and “the flesh” in prayer. Some see a reference to Psalm 51:11-12 in His words.²¹ His mention of “the flesh” is of great importance in regard to the subject of prayer. The “flesh” is “the general weakness of human beings, their vulnerability, their self-absorption, the human proclivity to rebel against the will of God.”²² As such, it is the great enemy of prayer in the lives of disciples.

Our mere humanity, our finiteness, seems to constantly beckoning us to self-reliance and self-gratification. The unredeemed part of our nature constantly wars against the work of God’s Spirit in our lives. Paul spoke of this reality in Galatians, saying, “I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don’t do what you want” (Galatians 5:16-17). The fight for faithful praying is first of all a fight against the flesh. If one wants to succeed in supplication, one must learn to be strong through the Spirit. If we don’t make war against the flesh, it will prevent us from praying as we ought.

¹⁹ Brooks, 234.

²⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 99.

²¹ Brooks, 235.

²² Schnabel, 365.

In encouraging His disciples to war against the flesh, Jesus told them “the spirit is willing.” The word translated “willing” carried the idea of one “being eager to be of service” to another.²³ What a great picture of the Holy Spirit’s disposition towards us. He wants to help us overcome the flesh! He stands willing and ready to help us pray. We only need to seek His assistance. The Third Person of the Trinity is the key to developing a strong prayer life. It is for this reason Jude instructed us to pray “in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20).

Verse 40

In verse 40, Jesus found His disciples sleeping a second time. We read, “And again he came and found them sleeping, because they could not keep their eyes open. They did not know what to say to him” (Mark 14:40). Being rebuked a second time for their prayerlessness, the disciples did not know what to say. What an embarrassing scene for Jesus’ inner circle. One has said Peter, James, and John gave what could be called a “dumb” reaction.²⁴ When rebuked, they had nothing to say. They were embarrassed because they had been caught red-handed. They had no reply or defense. They had no excuse. They knew they had failed, and they knew they were guilty.

The disciples’ inability to respond shows the depths of their spiritual sleepiness. Even after enjoying a special place in the first Lord’s Supper (Mark 14:12-25), they weren’t spiritually motivated to pray. Aren’t we similar to the first disciples? The disciples’ lack of defense also reminds us that there is no excuse for prayerlessness. Many may offer many reasons for why they fail to pray, but no excuse is valid in the eyes of Jesus. Neither lack of time, busyness, a short attention span, a full schedule, or worldly distractions are appropriate justifications for our negligence in prayer. We can only stare at Jesus in silence when confronted about our lack of private worship. There is nothing we can say to vindicate our failure.

Verse 41

Verse 41 told of how Jesus found His disciples sleeping a third time: “Then he came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The time has come. See, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (Mark 14:41). The fact that Jesus rebuked His disciples three different times was significant. Remember the context of the scene. The Lord had just foretold that Peter would deny Him three times (Mark 14:30). Because of upcoming temptation, the Lord had beckoned His disciples to pray (Mark 14:38). Instead of praying, they slept. They ignored the Lord’s injunctions. Three different times He found them slumbering. Their prayerlessness would result in spiritual failure. Peter failed to pray three times and he would deny the Lord three times.

In response to the disciples’ spiritual dullness, the Lord said, “Enough!” The word expressed Jesus’ utter exasperation with His disciples. It could have been rendered “it is settled” or “it is finished.”²⁵ The exclamation demonstrated that there was no more time to talk about prayer. Jesus’ betrayers were drawing near (Mark 14:43). The disciples had missed their opportunity to pray against temptation. Jesus didn’t have time to rebuke them further, or to correct their misunderstandings of prayer as He did in Matthew 6:9-12 and Luke 11:1-4. He had no time to listen to excuses. His betrayal was imminent. He was prayed up and ready to go. His greatest hour was before Him. The disciples would be left to fight their spiritual battles in the flesh alone (Mark 14:38).

Verse 42

²³ Schnabel, 366.

²⁴ Robertson, 385.

²⁵ Brooks, 235.

The scene from Gethsemane closed in verse 42 with Jesus saying, “Get up; let’s go. See, my betrayer is near” (Mark 14:42). The next passage — Mark 14:43-52 — will detail Jesus’ betrayal by Judas. Knowing such betrayal was near, Jesus commanded His disciples to leave the Garden of Gethsemane. Our Lord was prayed up. He had received the strength He needed through His supplications. He had surrendered Himself to the Lord’s will for His life and He was ready to face His fate. Our Lord’s resolve shows us that prayer gives us strength and steadfastness to embrace God’s duties and desires for our lives.