

March 24, 2024

Lesson 4: Praying in Distress

Scripture: Luke 22: 39-46

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “Encounters in Prayer and Love,” where we look at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God’s presence in our lives. Our first unit titled “Jesus Prays,” is an examination of all the ways Jesus engages in prayer. Today’s lesson will focus on how to consider how prayer functions during times of temptation.

The scripture lesson for today comes from the gospel of Luke. We continue with the final night Jesus spent with his disciples and this time move to the events after the Last Supper. The most famous transition of this evening is the garden, where Jesus’ arrest takes place moving us to the eventual trial and then condemnation. While Matthew and Mark call the place Gethsemane, and John simply calls it “a garden,” Luke labels the place as the Mount of Olives.¹ As with each gospel account, there are a few differences from the accounts in the other gospels.

For one thing, Jesus relates to the disciples differently. In some of the accounts, Jesus has just three disciples for an inner circle of prayer. In Luke’s gospel, all the disciples are asked to pray lest they enter temptation. Instead of coming to them three times, Jesus comes to them once only to find they are all sleeping as they are sorrowful.² Therefore, the reprimand is less severe and there is no repeat occurrence.

The bigger difference in Luke’s gospel is how Jesus prays in the garden. The overarching difference is the posture of Jesus in prayer. Jesus kneels in prayer rather than falling to the ground as Matthew and Mark record him doing so.³ During the prayer, Jesus repeats the same anguish as he does in the other gospels. Part of his prayer is both a confession and a submission. He names suffering will come to him and he also asks of the Father for this not to happen unless it is the will of God.

Jesus is not alone in his prayer time as an angel comes and stays with him. He continues to pray in anguish and begins to pray more fervently. His sweat begins to flow down like drops of blood as if he has an open wound. Jesus stays in this posture of prayer until he gets up to go see his disciples, only to find they have fallen asleep as they are overcome with grief, a common response to being overwhelmed when something major happens.

How Jesus is presented in this passage falls in line with major themes present in the gospel of Luke. Jesus is presented by Luke as a man of prayer and as a teacher of prayer.⁴ Thus, it makes sense as he faces arrest and death, this would be Jesus’ move to prepare for the moment. Jesus is a model of the Christian life so to show how a lifetime of prayer can be a source of strength in moments when one is not only seeking God’s will for oneself but also called to help

¹ Craddock, John. “Luke.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 261.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

others who need guidance and strength.⁵ In those moments, the Holy Spirit works to give sustenance in times of both stress and temptation.

Application

The word temptation often conjures up images of the first sin recorded; the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. There they were tempted to eat of the fruit of the one tree the Lord told them not to touch. And the rest is history.

If you are in a mainstream church, the odds are you pray to be delivered from temptation every Sunday if your community of faith prays the Lord's Prayer. As we pray "lead us not into temptation," we are naming how there will be things offered to us which will not ultimately be good for us. We pray God will help us to avoid those things which call our names to draw us away from the Lord and into our own destruction.

Jesus shows us how the prayer against temptation can come for many different things. Often temptation is presented in terms of things like greed or lust. We do not want to be tempted to do things like wish for things we do not need or be consumed with the passions of the flesh. Yet here Jesus uses prayer for a different temptation; one here he does not fully name yet becomes apparent later. He simply states to his sleepy, sorrowful disciples: "Get up and pray so you do not fall into temptation."

In the ensuing moment after Jesus says this, Judas Iscariot and the crowd comes to arrest Jesus. As Jesus' followers see what happens, they ask the Lord if they should strike him with their swords. Before Jesus can even answer, one of them strikes the ear of a servant of the high priest. And Jesus, who has just been praying for his life and the question of suffering, says "No more of this!," and heals the man.⁶ Then, Jesus is arrested and led away.

Things begin to click as the temptation to the disciples was to engage in violence, which they did. Throughout his teaching, Jesus had focused on not using violence to get back at others or to assert control. He constantly preached peace and in following him, choosing a life of service and goodness over power and dominance.

At the center of this teaching is a focus of prayer. Jesus is teaching us to pray for temptation and it's not just the usual suspects of greed and lust. Jesus wants us to pray for the temptation to use violence to get our way and to be in control.

Jesus very much knows about human nature. The oft temptation for us in this world is not to pray about our responses to others or how we go about dealing with issues such as anger or sadness. We move to a place of reactivity, sometimes calculating about what we will do or how we will respond if someone goes after us or says something about us.

For Christians though, we are to pray to be delivered from temptation and this includes how we respond to violence or perceived threats in our life. We may not be like the disciples carrying hidden clubs or knives in our pockets. Instead, we do have other weapons like our words or our actions. We are tempted in various ways to respond to the world without thinking of how praying can move us to see a different way of being in the world.

At this point in my Christian journey, I have come to discover anger is not a bad thing. Everyone gets angry and if they tell you otherwise, I would love to hear their secret to a very natural human thing. Anger tells us about values or things important to us like justice and

⁵ Ibid. 262.

⁶ Luke 22: 49-51.

fairness. Anger can even reveal when we are sad or upset something.

My now go-to practice with anger is speaking to a brother or sister in Christ who I trust to help me process what has led me to anger so I do not speak out in angst or violence. I then have learned to pray to God about what is going on with me, sometimes kneeling and other times on a run or a walk. And then, I can find the nudge to hold my peace or find a constructive way to engage with others who have turned on those little triggers of anger within me.

Just as Jesus has modeled for us, I have found this form of prayer takes time and energy. Yet it is ultimately worth it as being led into temptation to do or say things we will later regret is much harder to recover or come back from. When we think of prayer, the biggest temptation is to believe it can fit into the traditional offerings in prayer of thanksgiving or supplication for others. Yet prayer is also meant to give direction for daily life as Jesus modeled how all situations are to be covered with prayer.

When was a time you had to pray for God to help you with temptation? How does Jesus' prayer in the garden give us a prescription for times of anguish? What are times you have seen prayer guide people away from tempting situations? How is temptation tied to violence? Where do you practice prayer when you are faced with temptation?