



*Rev. Chris Taylor - 11.24.19*

*"Five Smooth Stones Sermon Series: Prayer"*

*Exodus 34:29-34 and Luke 11:1-8*

This morning we turn to the last of what we are calling the five essentials of the faith. We've looked at sacrifice, faith, fellowship and study. Today, we turn our attention to prayer.

I can't imagine a life without prayer, yet for many prayer is not a regular and ongoing part of their lives, but something they turn to in times of crisis. Better some prayer than none at all, but we miss so much when we fail to make it a part of our daily lives. This, surely, is one of the most important ways in which we open our lives to God.

Of course prayer doesn't always feel that way. Oftentimes it seems as if our prayers go unanswered. Other times, it can feel as if we are talking to an empty room – talking with no one listening on the other side. It is that lack of immediate reward that can discourage so many of us.

Like regular exercise, we aren't necessarily going to see an immediate impact as a result of our prayers. Sometimes we do, but more often the impact is felt over the long-term – felt over months and years and the qualitative difference that emerges in a life that has been shaped by prayer.

Why pray? The most compelling answer is that we should pray because that's what Jesus did. Read Luke's Gospel and you will find that before every major event in his life Jesus prayed. The pattern is there right from the start, at the very beginning of his ministry (Lk. 3:21-22):

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This was the turning point. It is when his ministry began: the Spirit descending upon him, setting him apart, and the Father proclaiming his unique standing and place. And it happened, we are told, as Jesus was praying.

What does Jesus do when he is about to choose the twelve? Luke 6:12: “Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, who he also named apostles...” These were the people that would carry his ministry forward after his crucifixion. If they failed, everything would die right there with that first generation. This was crucial for him. No wonder he spent the entire night in prayer!

When should he tell his followers that far from being a conquering warrior or triumphant king, the Messiah would be rejected, persecuted, and die upon a cross? This was going to contradict everything they had ever believed. Jesus goes off to pray (9:18), and it is only after that prayer that Peter first proclaims him the Messiah, and that Jesus goes on to give his followers their first hint of what’s to come.

It is shortly after this that Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a nearby mountain (9:28). No surprise here, it is as Jesus is praying that the appearance of his face is changed, and his clothes become dazzling white, and suddenly Moses and Elijah are talking to him. This is the transfiguration – the first glimpse of the astounding glory yet to come. It is confirmation that in spite of what Jesus has just told them about his suffering and death that he is everything they thought he was and so much more.

What does Jesus do on the night of his betrayal? He leads his disciples into the Garden of Gethsemane, tells them to pray, then withdraws a stone’s throw away, kneels down, and prays, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done” (22:39-46).

Here is the very Son of God, God in the form of human flesh, and the one thing we constantly see him do all through his ministry is spend time in prayer. That’s why, here in our text, the disciples ask him to teach them how to pray. They’ve seen how important prayer is to him. They’ve realized that prayer should be part of their lives, as well.

In the verses that follow we get a sense of why prayer was so important to Jesus. He tells us to address God as “Abba, Father” – an immediate and intimate form of address, the same form we might use if we were talking to our earthly parent. There is, in other words, an extraordinary connection that happens when we turn to God in prayer.

Sometimes when I am praying I'm so overwhelmed by a sense of God's infinite majesty and the stature and authority of Jesus that I find myself shrinking back. "Who am I to approach Jesus, or to draw into God's presence?" The whole idea seems presumptuous and incredibly arrogant. That's when I remind myself that it was precisely so that I could approach God in this way that Jesus died for us. We are never good enough to be worthy of this. But through Jesus God has provided for our forgiveness. Through Jesus we become God's beloved children. And in Jesus we see the depths of God's love for us; a love that – even as insignificant as I might feel at times – includes even me. "Abba, Father."

Then there is Jesus' call to be persistent, to keep on praying even when we feel our prayers have no effect. Speaking of that poor friend who was awakened at midnight for a loaf of bread, Jesus says, "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs." That's what God does.

God hears our cry, and as long as that cry is on our hearts we should to bring it before the Lord. Jesus goes on to make a promise: "Ask and it will be give you; search, and you will find,; knock, and the door will be opened for you... If you (who are evil) know how to give good gifts to your children, ho much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Like Luke, Matthew tells us that on the night of his betrayal Jesus turned to the Father: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me..." But he goes on to say that Jesus made this request not just once but three separate times (Mt. 26:36-46). Persistence. Then, having prayed, Jesus moved forward. He moved towards his destiny. Having prayed, he believed that his future now rested in the hands of a loving God, and that this God would be at work even in the darkness of betrayal and death.

We are all going to face giants at some point. It comes with living in this world. For Jesus it was his crucifixion. For us, it might be the loss of loved one, a health crisis, or some dynamic at work that throws our future into question.

What should we do? We do what Jesus did: we pray and then we move forward. Not because we are sure of the outcome. Not because we can see our way clearly all the way to the end. No, we step forward because having prayed we believe that God is with us; believe that even here the Lord is moving and very much at work.

The life Jesus revealed to us, the one he made possible through his death and resurrection, is a life lived in deep and intimate relationship with God. Sacrifice, faith, study and fellowship – they are all part of opening our lives to this God. But don't forget the fifth stone. Remember to pray. Make prayer a regular part of your life and you will find over the course of time God doing in you and through you so much more than you could have ever hoped.