

Sermon for Sunday, March 4, 2012
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Testing and Prayer in Gethsemane
Mark 14:27-42

Mark 14:27 "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' 28 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." 29 Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." 30 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today, yes, tonight, before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." 31 But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same. 32 They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." 33 He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 34 "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." 35 Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 36 "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." 37 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? 38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." 39 Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. 40 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. 41 Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42 Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

1. Strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter (14:27-31)

There are two kinds of tests, academic tests and all the rest of the tests life sends us. If you're done with school, you're glad the academic tests are over. But the tests of life never end. Today, we examine Jesus and ourselves in the hour of testing.

We're on a journey with Jesus, traveling toward his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. Israel's chief priests and elders want to kill Jesus because he threatens their leadership. Judas plans to betray Jesus to them. Yet Jesus also evokes passionate loyalty. A woman anoints him with perfume that cost a year's wages. A wealthy man risks his property by hosting Jesus' last supper with his disciples.

In their last meal, Jesus and his disciples observed the Passover, celebrating the release of Israel from slavery in Egypt. When the meal ended, they still had a topic to discuss.

Earlier, Jesus said, "One of you will betray me." They disciples were horrified and said, "Surely not I" (14:18-19). Yet it would be one of them - Judas. Now Jesus tells his disciplines, "You will all fall away [Greek skandalizo suggests they'll be surprised and offended] for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'" (14:27). That is, when Jesus, the shepherd, dies the disciples will be offended by the test and fall away as a result. Indeed all deserted Jesus that very night. Judas was a traitor, but the rest succumbed to fear when events surprised them. They never listened when Jesus predicted his death and resurrection.

So they were unprepared when the moment came. They abandoned him, but he never abandoned them. Jesus will die, but he says, "After I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee" (14:28). The disciples will be reunited to Jesus there.

The disciples need to grow. Earlier that night, Jesus predicted that one of the disciples would betray him. They all asked, "Surely it is not I, Lord" (14:19). It was a question, a moment of sensible self-doubt. But now Peter boasts, Not I! - "Even if all fall away, I will not" (14:29). If only one disciple stands, he will be the one!

Jesus rejects Peter's braggadocio: "Tonight, before the rooster crows twice, you yourself will disown me three times" (14:30). Peter says Jesus is wrong. He insists "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. And all the others said the same" (14:31). So the disciples abandon godly humility. They promise more than they can give "in a moment of intoxicated self-confidence." ¹

Sadly, the disciples broke their promises and fled when soldiers came to arrest Jesus. At this moment, Peter is vehement: He will never fail Jesus. But later that night, Peter swore just as intensely, "I don't know the man!" So the disciples fell away, as Jesus said. We must learn from this. We must hear hard things Jesus says. Scripture says, "We all stumble in many ways." Peter swings from heights to depths because he will not to listen.

We all stumble. If we expect to stumble, it may be easier to get up. If we expect others to fall, we may not be so disillusioned when they do. We idolize people one day and villainize them the next. The gospel can save us from extremes of failure and disappointment. Let's keep our expectations, of ourselves, of others, in line with the gospel. It says Jesus saves because we can't save ourselves.

Events unfolded as Jesus said, but the disciples were unprepared, so they stumbled. Their boast, "We will never fail" was foolish. They intended to be loyal. But it's easy to make promises when threats are distant. We should watch ourselves. We should be "slow to speak" and add, "If the Lord wills" (Jas 1:19, 4:15).

But we should watch Jesus even more. The disciples failed, but Jesus did not. He says he will rise and go before them into Galilee, and he does. The disciples abandoned Jesus, but he did not abandon them. This is a great comfort. We make rash promises and empty boasts. We become frightened and fail. But the Lord doesn't fail those who trust him. If our core allegiance is to him, he will never disown us. Paul says in 2 Tim 2:12-13:

If we endure, we will also reign with him.

If we disown him, he will also disown us;

If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

We wonder: What's the difference between disowning Jesus, so that he disowns us and being unfaithful to him, while he remains faithful? To disown Jesus is to deny, repudiate him absolutely. But here to be faithless means to fail to live up to our resolve to follow Him (Matt 10:32-33). The lesson: You will fail. Every human we trust will fail. If we repudiate Jesus, we reject the one who will always be faithful to us. But if we falter, he will never forsake us. That is good news indeed.

¹ Calvin, 3:142

2. Jesus is tested in Gethsemane (14:32-36)

In the prior scene, Mark 14:27-31, Jesus predicts that the disciples will desert him. In this scene, they do desert him. In these moments, Jesus' disciples are near Jesus physically. Yet he faces his crisis alone. Here he prays alone at night, facing great evil. He has prayed in such times before (1:35, 6:46) so he can teach us how.

There are two gardens in the drama of redemption. In Eden, the drama began when Adam failed the test of obedience to God. In Gethsemane, Jesus, the second Adam, passed the test of obedience to the Father's will.

In Gethsemane Jesus told his disciples, "Sit here while I pray" (14:32). Then, "He took Peter, James and John along with him." Jesus wanted company – Matthew says he asked the disciples to "watch with me" (26:38). But he also wants to instruct Peter, James and John once more. They said they can "drink the cup" of his suffering, that they are willing to die with Jesus (14:29-31, 10:38-39). Perhaps Jesus can help them prepare. Alas, they fell asleep.

This is the hour of Jesus' great crisis. He is distressed and troubled 14:33. He said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." Jesus asked his disciples to watch, then went off a little way, "fell to the ground and prayed" that if possible the hour might pass. He said 'Abba, Father everything is possible for you. *Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will*' (14:34-36).

How shall we understand this? First, notice our Lord's posture. Face to the ground, he humbly bows to make his request. The Bible never specifies the proper posture for prayer, but it describes the posture godly people take as the pray:

- ☐ Some stand, lifting hands to heaven
- ☐ Some kneel, bowing the knee before the Lord.
- ☐ Jesus bows to the ground, in humblest position.
- ☐ The postures follow and express our heart. Let us be earnest in mind and body.

But why does Jesus pray this way? Why was he overwhelmed with anguish, sorrow? Maybe you know the answer: Jesus' death is unique. He came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). Note: Jesus prays that "this **cup** be taken from me." In Scripture "this cup" means the chalice of God's wrath that he pours on the wicked to punish *chronic, unrepentant* sin. They drink, stagger and fall as they taste "destruction, famine and sword" from "the goblet of God's wrath" (Isa 51:17-23). Israel and the nations deserve this cup, but Jesus does not.

God will take the cup away one day, so that Israel "will never drink again" (Isa 51:22). Now Jesus says he will drink the cup. This explains Jesus' anguish: He doesn't fear pain and *death*. When he is arrested, he is calm! At this moment, he grieves because he faces the prospect of God's wrath. How terrible! He has lived with the Father in *unbroken fellowship* but now as he bows to his Father in heaven, he sees hell. For hell, in essence, is separation from God in all his goodness. And Jesus will lose that for a day. (That is the sense in which he descended into hell.)

In the novel, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy tumble from a wardrobe into the land of Narnia, where, by the spell of an evil witch, it is always winter, but never Christmas. Edmund enters in a sulky, quarrelsome mood. This makes him susceptible to the witch, who first captivates him, then holds him captive. The other three are angry with Edmund, but they still love

him. When they meet the hero, the lion Aslan, Lucy asks, "Please - Aslan, can anything be done to save Edmund?" Aslan replies, "All shall be done. But it may be harder than you think." In the end, Aslan must forfeit his life to save Edmund. In the novel, Aslan substitutes for Edmund, but it would be more life-like if he substituted for all for children, for all humans are sinners.

Jesus secures the disciples' release and it's harder than we might think. Jesus died on the cross and crucifixion is a terrible way to die. But we see no fear in Jesus when he endures physical pain as a man. It is sin-bearing and temporary separation from the Father that alarms Jesus. Alienation from the Father is a terror to him – as it should be for us. So he prays through it and it's a model for us.

Jesus at prayer in the hour of need

We know Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, but do you wonder *what he said*? We have a good idea. You see Jesus prayed often, day and night. He gave thanks, praised, sought guidance, and declared his sorrows. His disciples saw this and said, "Lord teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). Jesus taught them what we call the Lord's prayer.

The Lord's prayer begins "Our Father," followed by six petitions. The petitions fall into two parts. We focus on part 2, where Jesus teaches us to ask God for help: "Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation." Jesus wants us to pray for our needs. God *cares about* our needs – for food, clothing, shelter, forgiveness, and God's direction, that we may avoid sin. The Lord wants us to take our needs to him.

But the Lord's prayer doesn't begin with our needs. It starts, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Here are the high points:

True prayer is personal and familial. We could call God many things – master, king, creator, ruler. But Jesus says "Pray 'Our **Father**.'"

His first prayer is for God's name. May his character, his will, deeds and ways receive the honor they deserve. What a good thing to pray!

"Your kingdom come" means we want God to rule and pray that his rule becomes more evident day by day. Then his will shall be done on earth.

See how Jesus prays according to the Lord's Prayer in the garden? His address is warm and trusting: "My Father." Yes he teaches us to pray "*our* Father," but Jesus has unique intimacy with the Father. How blessed that he shares the name "Father" with us. Let's say it and mean it.

Jesus tells us to pray "Your will be done" and he prays the same way. See his humility: "If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." He places the Father's will over his own. We should too. We should *say what we want*, then say: Yet may *your will*, not mine, be done.

We should take our *desires* to the Father, then ask him to decide. Why? Because we ask for the wrong things. Suppose young Mark notices a kind and beautiful young woman at school. What if he prays "Lord, make Carol fall in love with me." Well, God could do that, but are Carol and Mark a match? As Jesus says, "everything is *possible*" with God, but *not everything is good*, and many things contradict his plans (14:36).

Jesus prayed "Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me." It was *possible* for Jesus to avoid the cup – if he chose not to redeem mankind. The cross was necessary if and only if he wanted to redeem his people. Sin has a price and either we pay it or Jesus does. Jesus wanted that more than he wanted his will.

Jesus prayed at length and the Father strengthened him (Luke 22:43). Jesus then "went away" again "and prayed the same thing" (14:39). His anguish was so great that he prayed a "third time." Then he petitioned no more, for he submitted to the Father's will saying, "The hour has come" (14:41).

See how Jesus stood firm. He began with anguished prayer in the garden. Jesus declared his distress. He didn't want to endure the cross. But he listened to the Father's answer. Because he said exactly what he felt, he heard and embraced the Father's answer. That fortified him as priests plotted and Judas betrayed. He knew the Father's will.

We have every right to plead and lament before God. But when we finish and hear his will, we can stop. So when work is misery, when a relationship falls apart, when illness strikes, when a proposal is struck down, pour out your lament. Tell God everything. Then listen for his reply and accept it.

When I finished grad school, I took a call to revitalize a struggling church plant in a small town in western Maryland. Six weeks after I arrived, the area's largest employer, a textile plant, closed its doors forever. Unemployment reached 20% (United States was 6%). A great exodus began. That year, almost 40% of the people in our church moved *to another state*. It was wrenching, but I knew the Lord's will; that gave me resolve to endure.

So Jesus passed the test of his character and obedience and he teaches us how to do the same. First, he prays, "Your will be done." He prays humbly, face down. He doesn't object to the Father's will, he simply asks, "Is it necessary?", then yields.

3. The disciples are tested in Gethsemane (14:37-42)

After he prayed, Jesus returned to Peter, James and John and "found them sleeping." Couldn't they "keep watch for one hour?" Jesus commands, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (14:37-38). Jesus says they need to *keep praying*, not for Jesus but for themselves, to withstand their coming tests.

In all, Jesus found them asleep three times. In all, Peter denied Jesus three times, even though he had promised to be faithful. Did he think his promise would be enough to carry him through temptation, through the cosmic conflict with evil? The Spirit is willing – the Spirit of God and the spirit of Peter too. But the flesh is weak: A "sinful man left to his own resources" will be "overwhelmed by a situation" despite our "best intentions."² Peter fell asleep and so entered spiritual combat without spiritual preparation. He needed to pray. So do we.

There are many ways to fall into sin. A few are drawn to evil for its own sake. Curiosity leads us to hear prohibitions, and think, "Why not? What am I missing?" We sin by habit. For example laziness and

² Lane 520

gossip are habit forming (1 Tim 5:13). We can sin due to expediency. We know what we want and we'll do anything to get it. Mark 14 shows several ways to fall into sin. See if any of them speak to you:

Overconfidence – When Jesus told the disciples they would all scatter, Peter said: “Not me, even if I have to die with you (14:31). Peter was earnest but weak.

Following the crowd – All the disciples agreed with Peter 14:31. So they *followed each other rather* than following Jesus.

Deafness – The disciples failed because they were oblivious. Jesus told them to "watch and pray" for "one hour" because the terrible test "is near." The disciples didn't listen; they chose to sleep (14:38-41). There are other sins of ignorance. Some people don't listen to the dangers of cohabitation or gambling or substance abuse. Or they hear, but turn a deaf ear. Listen!

Weakness – Jesus told disciples to, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation." But they fell asleep over and over "for their eyes were heavy" (14:40). Physical weakness spoils noble desires. Vince Lombardi said, "Fatigue makes cowards of us all." The disciples' exhaustion made it easier to fail Jesus. Exhaustion is one reason why we can't do the good we want. Remember the Sabbath; stay strong!

But there are times to shun sleep, however tired we feel. There is a time to watch and pray long deep into the night or long before sunrise. When Jesus found his disciples sleeping one more time, he gently chided them. The translation is uncertain: "Sleep on now, and take your rest" or "Are you still sleeping and resting?" Either way, Jesus challenges his disciples, yet he is tender. He knows they are overwhelmed and forgives them. Now it's too late to grow strong in prayer, so they might as well sleep a few minutes: "Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer" (Mark 14:41-42).

Lesson: Resolve is good, but it can go only so far when we enter conflict with evil. But Peter entered spiritual combat without spiritual preparation and failed. The flesh is weak. We may be overwhelmed, whatever we say, without God's Spirit. In prayer, we lay hold of the Spirit. So we need to pray.

Mark's story of Gethsemane gives practical help. First, take comfort that Jesus faced tests just as we do. He can “sympathize with our weaknesses” because he “has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:14-15). Jesus faced the test three times because testing is part of the human condition. We will be tested. The old song says, "Nobody knows the trouble I seen, nobody knows like Jesus." He faced accusation, betrayal, and violence, as we do.

Second, arm yourselves with prayer, as Jesus did. Jesus faced his foes armed with nothing but prayer. Like him, we endure temptation by prayer. We learn to obey through our tests. Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb 5:8). We can too learn obedience by suffering.

Third, note that not even Jesus received what he asked. He heard only “the hard answer of events.”³ He prayed, face to the ground, seeking the Father's will, not his own. We're prone to the opposite. We want *our goal, our desire*. Example: If someone offends us, we may rehearse it or even plan on getting even. If we pray, we might see that the offense isn't so bad. We may feel compassion and forgive.

³ Cranfield, Mark, 434

Fourth, learn to seek God's strength. Look what happened this night. The disciples say, "We're willing to die for Jesus." Hours later they abandon him to save their skin. Peter says he will never fall away; hours later, he falls away. You aren't so different. Have you ever resolved, "I'll stay calm. I won't say a word in this meeting"? How did that work? Our emotions and impulses defeat us, because "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." The flesh is our sinful nature. When we pray, we ask God's Spirit to strengthen our spirit, so we can be faithful.

There is always a gap between our will and our flesh. Does Mark want us to try all the harder? We *should* keep battling sin! But remember the rest of the story. Jesus is arrested and crucified to complete the plan of redemption. He knows we can't keep our resolutions. Jesus came *because* we stumble and fall, to redeem us and forgive our sins.

By faith, we receive his grace and begin to overcome our weaknesses. So Jesus empathizes with our weakness, but he also overcomes it. Hebrews tells us to pray: let us "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:16). We can find mercy and strength. Will we fail as parents, as friends, as husband or wife? Yes, but perhaps not quite so often, as we keep following Jesus' pattern in prayer.

So pray, by day and night, alone and together. Pray in a posture that fits the words. Pray freely asking the Father, yet adding, "Not my will - yours!"