

Jesus: The One Who Prayed

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Luke 3:21-22; 6:11-16; 11:1-4; 22:38-46; 23:44-46

There's plenty of room for discussion when it comes to the precise nature of our Lord Jesus. Was He human? Was He somehow God, who came in the flesh to visit and save and redeem planet earth? Was He both, as the creeds confess? Was He, and is He still, one of the three persons who has always existed, comprising the eternal Trinity of God? All valid questions—questions about which His own Church, His own followers, were debating vigorously even in the first centuries after His death. Some still are.

But there's one very important fact just about everyone can agree on. Jesus was the One who prayed. He prayed both habitually, consistently, all the time—and He also prayed especially before He had big decisions to make and big things to do. He prayed because He was facing something otherwise too demanding or overwhelming for Him to manage—and He also prayed just because He was Jesus, and it's how He chose to live His life and to be who He was. Praying was like breathing to Him.

Whatever you may believe about the nature of Jesus, I hope you know that you and I have the capacity to pray just as Jesus prayed. His identity, however you understand Him, conferred on Him no special privilege regarding prayer. He was the most effective and powerful person who ever lived—not to mention the most wise and loving and good—but I believe these came as a result of His practice of prayer.

This can be incredibly good news for you and me. We are invited to share in the same powers and pleasures of prayer Jesus exercised. In fact this is just what He wants! His followers asked Jesus how they should pray—but they knew how to pray already. They were good Jews; they had been praying at home and in services since they could talk. Why did they ask Jesus to find out how He prayed?

Surely it was because of what they observed in Him. They saw Him praying; they knew His habits and His ways. They saw the faithfulness and the power in His life. They saw the singular integrity in the life of Jesus. They asked Him not as one would have asked Socrates about theoretical metaphysics nor as one would have asked Noah Webster about the various definitions of prayer. Nothing theoretical or conceptual in their eagerness to know how Jesus prayed: they asked Him because they wanted to live like He lived, to enjoy the pleasures of prayer and the power of prayer and the satisfaction of

answered prayer the way they observed Jesus enjoyed these.

If you're a bit double-minded about prayer, do not be worried. Most people are. Most of us—especially in this church—agree that prayer is extremely important. I googled “prayer” this week: guess how many entries there are? 120 million. The Gallup poll tells us more Americans will pray this week than will go to work, make love, exercise, or drive a car. Every religion practices some sort of prayer, and I happen to believe we are all “created in the image of God,” which means we're hard-wired by our Creator to desire to pray to Him whether we have suppressed this desire or cultivated it.

This innate God-placed desire to pray can manifest itself in some odd ways. In his excellent book *Prayer* Philip Yancey notes how even the pillars of atheism in the old USSR figured out how to indulge this God-given desire to pray. The Communist Party's newspaper, *Pravda*, printed this advice on prayer to its 1950 readers: “If you meet with your difficulties in your work, or suddenly doubt your abilities, think of him—of Stalin—and you will find the confidence you need. If you feel tired in an hour when you should not, think of him—of Stalin—and your work will go well. If you are seeking a correct decision, think of him—of Stalin—and you will make that decision.” (Of course enemies of the Church have been charging for centuries that prayer is pleading with a God who does not exist, will-fulfilling foolishness. Yet the effectiveness of prayer, the confidence in the power of prayer—even silly kinds of prayer—will not go away. I got curious about some of those 120 million entries on prayer, so I clicked back behind the Wikipedia entry and the first few on the first page, and found on about screen #11 that in at least one virtual fantasy game: “Runescape”—prayer is seen as a definite advantage. “Prayer can give you a huge advantage when facing even the meanest of enemies during combat. It can come in handy if you need an extra burst of strength...or even faster healing time! Since there are so many things it can help with, prayer is a skill worth getting better at, even though it can be quite tedious at times.” (There are then quick links to how you can learn “how to train your prayer level quickly and efficiently.” By NJL72413. Don't know if he or she ever went on a prayer retreat.)

Even virtual prayer warriors know that prayer is a mixed

bag. It can be extremely helpful, but it can be “quite tedious at times.” We read that giants in the faith like Martin Luther prayed 2 hours every day (except when he faced an exceptionally busy day, when he needed 3) and John Wesley prayed 3 most every day. Jonathan Edwards wrote of the “sweet hours” he spent “rapt and swallowed up in God” on the banks of the Hudson River. The favorite pastime for Rees Howells, when he had a little time off from traveling as a missionary or from his normal duties of supporting churches and establishing schools, was to spend entire days wandering alone, in prayer with God, on the moors near his home in Wales. Not to mention Jesus: He loved to pray.

Yet most of us do not. Most of us experience prayer as a privilege, a duty, a responsibility, a frustration, occasionally a great pleasure. We think of prayer as an art or a discipline at which we can get better. We experience prayer as periods of dullness and distraction and lack of focus. Sometimes we experience flashes of insight or intimacy or joy. Sometimes there’s irritation. In other words, how we pray, how we enjoy the Presence of God, is a lot like how we experience other relationships important to us.

I Jesus prayed as naturally and necessarily as He breathed—and slept and ate and drank. These were necessary elements of His staying biologically alive; He understood praying, if He thought about it at all, as the necessary element of staying spiritually alive, which was obviously the more important to Him. He never tried to convince anyone to pray, never argued about it, seldom explained it—any more than I would try to convince all of you that I am here preaching to you this morning. It was self-evident to Jesus in the same way the existence of God was self-evident to Him or the existence of each of you here in these pews is self-evident to me. No need to argue it, no point in arguing it. So Jesus just prayed. Late at night after a strenuous day, before first light when the world was still asleep, sometimes all night long.

Jesus faced the same obstacles to prayer which slow you and me down. Let’s think about four of those obstacles.

- 1) We’re too busy to pray as we’d like.
- 2) We get impatient or discouraged and lose heart or quit for a time.
- 3) We think the point of prayer is to get what we want rather than for God to get what He wants.
- 4) We fail to come before God with a pure heart.

One at a time.:

- 1) Do you ever conclude you’re just too busy to pray

the way you’d like to? Now that’s a crock, isn’t it? (If you prefer, as my dad used to say, “That’s a bunch of hogwash.”) I know you and I are most of us too busy in general—maybe sometimes way too busy, and probably needing to prioritize and prune back some of those activities we’re so darned busy with. But we do choose our schedules and our activities. (Bill Hybels, pastor of one of the biggest megachurches in the land, wrote a book called *Too Busy Not to Pray*. If I had a little more time I think I’d read it again and devote more time to praying.)

Jesus had an entire world to transform and redeem and three years in which to manage it. He had His body and His energy and the 24 hours in His day just as you have. Many of His days were filled with one thing after another: crowds besieging Him, His own disciples wanting to question Him and monopolize His time, the sick and the broken coming to Him, one after another, long into the night. Often He would heal every last one.

But it seems the busier He was, the more careful He was to take time to pray. There was surely an element of prayer in every action He took, but prayer by itself, quietly set apart, with passion and purpose, was a high priority to Jesus. You may have heard the quotation of Abraham Lincoln, the old railsplitter who knew about life on the frontier: “If I had an hour to chop down a tree I’d spend the first 45 minutes sharpening the axe.” The more work Jesus had facing Him, the more He’d emphasize praying. He understood every one of His days as a gift from God; every hour also a gift. There’s plenty of work to do for every one of us, and never enough time to do it all. Think of your daily praying, your constant praying, as sharpening your axe.

2) Jesus prayed with persistence. It’s so easy for us to get discouraged: “I pray for the same things over and over and then we come to a stalemate, God and I, and it seems nothing ever changes...” So you and I move on to pray about something else. Or we get sour on prayer in general, and turn away from time alone with God to devote our attention to more productive activities—until we get tired of trying to chop down our personal forest of challenges and opportunities with a dull axe, and we come back to our prayer life again.

Jesus must have been sympathetic to followers like us. Why else would He have given us the parable of the poor widow who had no money with which to pay the requisite bribes, no alternative. So she kept pestering the judge, whether her case had merit or not. Day after day, maybe year after year. From one day to the next she never had any assurance that “this would be her lucky day,” but she kept showing up every day anyway. She kept at him, badgering him and creating a scene. Finally she wears him

out. He gives in. And Jesus holds her up as the exemplar of how to pray. Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking—and finally God will answer, God will allow you to find, God will open the door. It may be moments, or days, or years, or decades—or centuries.

Maybe this attribute of persistence is why Jesus was so impressed by blind Bartimaeus, whom everyone tried to silence but who kept shouting and shouting and shouting the louder until Jesus relented and healed him. Or the Canaanite woman to whom Jesus told “no” only to finally change His mind and heal her daughter after the woman would just not take “no” for an answer. Or the paralyzed man whose friends were stopped at the door of the room where Jesus was. So they sawed a hole in the roof and lowered their friend down on ropes into His presence. Jesus loved the way people just kept at it; we assume He “kept at it” with His prayers also. This, too, is something you and I can do: we can “keep at it” with our prayers. Jesus is telling us His secret to answered prayer: keep at it. Keep persevering even when it seems it’s doing no good.

3) In fact it may be that one of the chief benefits of prayer is not that we get what we wanted—the fact is some of the things we most desperately wanted would have done us harm to have received. (A god who grants people everything they want would be a demon.) The Roman philosopher Cicero summed up pagan prayer this way: “We do not pray to Jupiter to make us good, but to give us material benefits.” (At least he was honest about it). But as we are faithful and persistent in spending our time before the living God, as Jesus did—our hearts open, our desires clear—we find we are changed. The more time you spend with God the more time God has to help you see the world, and yourself and your life, through His eyes. Over time you begin to see God is the wiser One of the two of you; God has the larger and better perspective. Persist in prayer long enough and you’ll find you begin to pray for different things, better things—God’s things. God begins to give you things you need rather than the things you wanted. Persist even longer, and you’ll begin to find yourself wanting the things God wants.

4) Let’s talk about one more factor which Jesus also had to overcome in His life of effective and persistent prayer. Jesus went to pray before the Father in truthfulness and candor; “in spirit and in truth”. Jesus did not deceive Himself or God His Father. Every relationship worth maintaining rests on a foundation of honesty and trust: the prayer relationship with God is no exception.

A man is being a terrible dad when he buys his teenage daughter a new car who totaled the last one and has never admitted she was at fault even when all the witnesses on

the scene and the police report conclude she was speeding and ran a red light. It’s a foolish fiancé who marries the charming fellow she’s seeing whom she knows is two-timing her just because she hopes he’ll change.

It would be a foolish God who rewarded our scheming ways; who gave us the desire of our heart before we’ve been honest with Him about our past. (Don’t misunderstand: if we had to be perfect before God would hear our prayer we’d all be in big trouble. When your child is in danger, crying out for you, you respond. God does not love us based on how perfect we try to act or pretend to be. God just loves you: expert or novice, at prayer or at life).

But sin still separates us from God; it’s “the pure in heart” who will see God. [Mt 5:8] “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened,” says the Psalmist. [66:18] If it seems God is not listening to you when you pray, then go through the checklist. Are you holding out on God? Are you pretending things you are trying to hide will just “fade away”? Are there attitudes you hold on to even though you know you are being disobedient, or areas in your life in which you resist having God transform you into the image of Christ? Yes, God loves you, and His love always allows you the freedom to linger at a distance from Him—to keep yourself as far away as you choose. But then you can’t have it both ways and be annoyed that God does not feel intimate and close at hand when you pray. And you can’t blame God if you have been holding out or keeping away.

We have noted how Jesus did not allow a busy schedule to keep Him from praying. He prayed with persistence; He prayed for God’s will to be done with a pure heart before the Father. You and I are capable of praying likewise. I know I get discouraged about prayer at times—how foolish! Jesus has laid out the example for us exactly how we may experience the power and the joy of communion with God. (Sometimes it turns out that way.) When I fall short it’s my own choice. A foolish one, but always a choice.

II Jesus not only prayed habitually, but He prayed extra in the face of specific challenges. The long list we heard from Luke’s gospel alone reminds us of Jesus’ practice of going away for doses of extra prayer when facing particular challenges. He was praying at His baptism as He considered and moved into His “God-assignment”—how God was asking Him to spend the rest of His life.

He was praying all night after the religious officials threatened Him—another healing on the Sabbath—and the night before He was going to choose His twelve apostles. (Even Jesus didn’t dare make a big choice with

only a casual bit of prayer. Who do I think it's OK for me to coast by on my IQ and my common sense?)

Jesus was transfigured on the mountain after He had slipped away with Peter, James and John to go pray. He was praying as the fullness of the glory of God backlit His face like a thousand lightning bolts all at once. But even this scene did not happen at random; at this very time Jesus was turning His attention to Jerusalem and toward the cross.

We also heard how Jesus had gone out especially into the Garden of Gethsemane in order to pray as He saw the agony of the cross coming closer, now only hours away. Prayer did not alter the events of history, though it did strengthen His resolve to offer His biological life, in the highest integrity and courage. Jesus would not and did not approach the most trying day of His life, of anyone's life who ever lived, apart from having prayed and prayed and prayed.

Jesus' example in prayer for us is not easy, but it is simple. Each of you is facing some difficulty, some trial, some challenge. (And probably not just one). I know a few of them; you know more of them. God knows each one.

Pray to God, as Jesus did. Most of His followers have prayed to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now that Jesus Himself has been raised up into the same dimension as the Father. (As Paul puts it, Jesus is now "at the right hand of God".) Be this as it may, keep praying with dogged persistence to God.

If you still get frustrated about prayer, as I do and apparently even the twelve apostles did, don't be worried. Honest doubt is no sin. Just do not give up. If you still wonder what good—if any—comes from all your praying: do not give up. If you still have doubts about how it all works, or fails to work, do not give up.

Instead, call to mind the image of Jesus on His knees, long after dark or maybe shortly before dawn, off by Himself away from the crowds with even His followers still asleep. There is Jesus, bowed down in trusting obedience before His Father. Rapt with focused attention. Expectant. Loving to spend that time in that way. Every day, and especially before "big days".

Is there any answer to the mixed blessing of prayer more convincing than the vision of Jesus on His knees? Is there any argument that the Christ at constant prayer does not answer?

In the matter of prayer or in any other matter, would you rather trust in your own uncertainty, or in the certainty of Jesus?

Luke 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.'

Luke 6:11-16

But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. 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, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Luke 11:1-4

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

Luke 22:38-46

They said, 'Lord, look, here are two swords.' He replied, 'It is enough.' He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.'

Luke 23:44-46

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last.