Sunday Sermon Notes

While It Was Still Dark, He Prayed

Mark 1:32–45 · English Standard Version

Mark 1:32–45 sets two questions. What challenges is Jesus facing, and how does he handle them?

The overarching challenge is the mission. Jesus has been sent to do the most important work in the history of the universe. If it fails, every soul is lost, man remains unreconciled, and God remains unsatisfied. There is no higher mission, and only he can do it. As he does it, he is busy beyond measure and in constant demand. He has no time or space for himself. Crowds press in on him. Even in the evening, when other people rest, they show up at his door in droves. When he tries to get away to an unpopulated place, they find him there. His closest friends do not understand, and they do not look after his welfare. The work itself is the hardest a person can face: human suffering, disease, deformity, and demonic power. On top of all of it, he has to get everything right. The mission, the preaching, the teaching, the message, the attitude, the words. He carries the mental, emotional, and physical fatigue of preaching, teaching, healing, talking, and listening. It is impossible to overstate how hard this is.

His Answer

What does he do? He does not buy a book on productivity, hire a management coach, or install a scheduling app. Verse 35 tells us. He gets away to a private place while it is still dark, and he prays. That is Jesus's answer to stress, to busyness, to hardship, to the crowds, to the demands, and to the mission.

> **Mark 1:35**
> *"And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed."*

Three things follow from that verse.

As Essential as Busyness

Prayer is as essential to a life pleasing to God as busyness is. Jesus has had the most exhausting day possible, and it has run into the night, when most people get to rest and sleep. There is always someone else to heal, always another demon, always another problem, always another demand. He disregards all of it, gets up, and prays.

Our culture exalts busyness. It is the busiest culture imaginable, and we are suspicious of people who are not busy, even critical of them. A full-time job is not enough. There must be a side hustle, more training, more classes, more seminars, more activities, more groups, more causes. Families feel the same pressure, especially with children. School is not enough. There must be multiple sports, every club, every class, every camp. Unless we are increasing our productivity and our activity, we feel that we are failing, and people who relax are thought to be lazy or unambitious.

The church often exalts the same thing. We want services that do not drag, with no space between anything. Prayers must not take too long. Songs must not be sung too slowly. We must start on time and end on time and keep moving. A moment in which nothing is happening, in which people might think, or meditate, or take a beat, feels like a failure. Church can resemble a train station, everything kept to schedule and tempo. We want more activities, more programs, more things for people to be doing. Bible reading becomes a quota: three chapters before bed, whether anything was understood or not, so long as the year is completed. Evangelism must be busy. Where, in all of that, is the room for meditation on Scripture, on God, on the Spirit? Where is contemplation? The psalms did not come from busyness. They came from people who stopped to think about nature and about God. Where is self-examination? It may be that we stay busy precisely so we do not have to face who we are. On the way to work and on the way home it is a podcast, or the news, or music, and never silence, because in the silence a person has to think about who he is and where this is going. Where is waiting on the Lord? We seem to believe that if the Lord is going to do anything, we must make it happen. Where is the principle of the Sabbath, of taking time off, of not being so busy that rest is impossible? Jesus, in Mark 1:35, refuses the busyness. He meets God in prayer.

Meeting God in prayer, as Jesus did, keeps several things from happening. It keeps us from becoming prisoners of performance, thinking that salvation and relationship with God depend on how much gets done. It keeps us from becoming exhausted burnouts, pouring out and never receiving. It keeps us from becoming people pleasers. Verse 37 is both exhausting and intoxicating. The disciples tell him that everyone is looking for him. That is exhausting. A teacher can spend an entire day hearing her name called, over and over, until the sound of it is wearying. Mothers say they want one day in which they do not hear the word Mom. It is also intoxicating. Everybody wants you. Everybody needs you. You are the one they desire. Prayer keeps us from becoming slaves to the demands of other people, and addicts to busyness. Workaholic is a word for a reason.

Religioaholic ought to be one as well. Ministry, church, and calling can become the addiction. Prayer keeps us from becoming spectacle seekers, always wanting something bigger and flashier, and from becoming heroes who must do it all themselves, and martyrs who are put upon and pitiful. Time alone with God, as Jesus had it, guards against all of that and furthers the relationship with God.

As Essential as Corporate Prayer

Personal, private prayer is as essential to spiritual health, for the individual and for the church, as corporate prayer is. Praying together is essential and powerful. Jesus said that when the church takes an action the Bible has commanded, God is fully with it. He then said that when believers pray together about something according to the will of God, God will say yes. He put a special privilege on corporate prayer. In Acts 2:42, one of the four pillars of the early church was continual devotion to prayer. In Acts 4:31, when the church faced a crisis, the immediate response was to get together and pray.

First Timothy is a manual on church life. Paul writes so that one may know how to conduct himself in the household of God. He will talk about elders, deacons, teaching, preaching, and care for the needy. But the first thing he names is prayer.

> **1 Timothy 2:1**
> *"First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people."*

We do not treat it that way. In a service, prayer can function like the intro and the outro of a radio show: a piece of music to signal that the program is starting, and another to signal that it is over. An opening prayer to announce that the Lord is in the building, the service itself, and a closing prayer to dismiss him so that ordinary conversation can resume. Paul says first of all. Together as the church, prayer ought to be first.

As important as corporate prayer is, Jesus in Mark 1 intentionally does something else. He gets up when nobody else will be awake, and he goes where no one else will be. He does not need corporate prayer at that moment. He needs private prayer, time alone with God. The reason is that some things require a one-on-one conversation. A family that loves to be together, and that talks about almost everything together, still has matters that cannot be discussed in front of everybody. The same is true of prayer.

Private prayer promotes genuine motives. There is no one sitting there noticing a word, or the length, or a fancy phrase. It allows for absolute honesty and vulnerability. We have laws protecting

conversations with doctors, lawyers, and spouses, because if anyone could compel those conversations to be repeated, no one would be honest again. When we talk to God privately, we can be honest. A pharmacy may stock thousands of medications, but a person does not need all of them. He needs the one or two that address what he has. Prayer alone with God is how we take hold of what we actually need.

That includes grief and suffering. Some of us hate to cry in front of other people. It is embarrassing, and for some of us it is not a composed crying. Age does not improve it. God does not mind. We can bring explicit confession. There is a debate in the church about how much a person must divulge when he comes forward. Some insist that everything be told, with whom and when, or it does not count. That demand is unnecessary, and there is a reason we do not practice it. There are things a person will not confess in front of people, however bold he is. He can confess them to God. Doubts and struggles can be spoken without the embarrassment of being told he should not have them. Personal secrets and fears can be spoken. Bitterness and anger against another person can be spoken. It would not do to stand in a public prayer and name the person and the resentment. It can be said to God, alone.

As Essential as the Mission

Prayer is as essential to the success of a mission as planning and execution are. Jesus was on a mission, but it was not his own. It was the Father's mission, and he was led by the Holy Spirit. In order to know how to carry it out, he needed prayer. He refuses to attempt the mission on his own, and he refuses to let even success keep him from prayer. He is the most sought-after person in the country. Everybody is coming to him. That is precisely why he has to pray.

Something happens because of the prayer, and it is easy to miss. In verse 34, two things are happening: healing disease and casting out demons. Preaching is not mentioned. In verse 39, in addition to the miracles, there is preaching, and it comes first. The reason is verse 35. Jesus prayed. The next thing he says to his disciples is that they should go to other places so that he can preach, because that is what he came for. Not the healing, not the miracles, not the busyness. The preaching. The prayer got him back on mission.

> **Mark 1:38**
> *"And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.""*

Mission creep happens easily. We thought we were doing one thing, and we ended up doing another. Prayer keeps that from happening. The prayer of Jesus led to a reset in his focus, and it will do the same for us.

Concluding Thoughts

Private communion with God is a powerful and essential force for change. Effective public action requires committed private stillness. A person cannot be effective publicly if he is not still, and quiet, and prayerful in private. Private, personal prayer is worth prioritizing.

The temptation is to answer the question of how with a list: schedule this, find that, do the other. That does not work. Zechariah 12:10 is more to the point. God says that he will pour out on his people a spirit of grace and of pleas for mercy. He will graciously give his people a heart for prayer. He will make them prayerful, so that when they look on him they will see him and respond to him as they never have, because they are in prayer.

Zechariah 12:10

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn."

What we need, then, is to ask God to help us pray more, to want to pray more, and actually to pray more. We ask him to give us a heart for prayer. We ask him to help us make one sacrifice, just one, this week. Get up earlier. Stay up later. Say no to an activity. Cut something short. Carve out more time for prayer. Do less, so that there is room to pray more. Ask God to help us be less busy. We do not need more activity. We need more of Him. And we ask for a genuine, open, and honest heart with him, so that the prayer is the kind of prayer that can be effective.

Jesus knew that seeking God and his kingdom required communion with God, privately and quietly. That is what he did. The kingdom of God is not built by busyness alone. It is built by prayer.