

April 14, 2019

“One Day: When Prayer Is Central”

Luke 19:29-48

A lot can happen in just One Day – especially if it’s a day in the life of Jesus. Nobody lived life more fully! And by “fully” I don’t mean to suggest Jesus lived an overscheduled, rushed, and frantic life. I’m using the word “fully” in a qualitative way, not quantitatively. Nobody lived with more integrity, more purpose, and more passion than Jesus. But He did so with an obedience and balance that was and is unparalleled. Jesus, and Jesus alone, knew when to speak up and when to be silent; when to work and when to rest; when to take action and when to be still; when to be with the crowds and when to be alone; when to preach prophetically . . . and when to **pray**. For Jesus, we see what happens **When Prayer Is Central**. He showed us how to live in perfect relationship with His Father – every minute of every day.

Not only can so much good stuff happen in a day – when we’re living life prayerfully in Jesus – but so much not-so-good stuff can happen from One Day to the next! How quickly things can change.

Throughout our state this past week there was an unbelievable temperature swing. Tuesday found some cities and towns in the 80’s. By Thursday morning there were towns recording lows around 0! A bomb cyclone can change things overnight. So can a hurricane or tornado or earthquake or avalanche. In just One Day, entire towns can go from peaceful and serene to devastated. This can happen with churches and nations, families and businesses. You’re employed one day and out of a job by the end of the week. You feel like you’re happily married, and then told it’s over. The pastor was preaching last Sunday, but he’s gone this week because the elders had to dismiss him for dishonesty and moral failure. A seemingly life-giving friendship ends when gossip wins out over confidentiality. One day your kids listen to every word you say, and the next day you don’t know anything 😊

How is it that massive changes like this can happen so quickly?

It was so good? What happened? How did we get here?

We see this dramatic change in the events of Holy Week. The week begins with such celebration and clarity! “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” (Luke 19:38; quotes from Psalm 118 & 148) How do we go from the clarity and celebration of “Hosanna” to all the condemnation and confusion – including betrayal, falling asleep on Jesus, and “Crucify Him”?

How do we go from Palm Sunday to Good Friday?

It looked like the people were so certain and focused waving their palm branches and spreading out their outer garments as Jesus rode into town on a donkey; more specifically, the unriden colt of a donkey – as Zechariah had prophesied (Zechariah 9:9). [Matthew and John make specific reference to this passage in their telling of the story.] The Triumphal Entry of Jesus lines up with a variety of Old Testament scriptures. The people use specific symbols (palms and cloaks) of praise and victory. Though it wasn't on a war horse that Jesus arrives for Passover, the people seemed to get it right as He passed by: "Hosanna! Save us, King Jesus!"

But that same crowd would get confused, and then be convinced, that they got it wrong; that Jesus wasn't who they thought He was. In a handful of days, the crowd turns on Jesus. The disciples lose their nerve. Even Judas, one of the Twelve, gets bribed and duped by the one group of people who refused to recognize and worship Jesus as King: the leaders of the temple. What a change in mood!

Do you know how this kind of "mood swing" can happen?

I'm sure there are several reasons for the sudden change of heart among the people. But one of the possibilities is connected to what happens after Jesus gets to town . . . after He gets over His sadness. **[By the way, Jesus is crying real tears. He is experiencing deep sorrow. His heart breaks that the people did not "recognize the time of [their] visitation from God." (Luke 19:44)]** It's after He weeps, Jesus clears out the temple with a mostly uncharacteristic intensity and fierceness.

What Jesus shouts is straight from the prophets, both Isaiah and Jeremiah: "My house shall be a house of prayer [for all the nations/peoples in Mark]; but you have made it a den of robbers." (Luke 19:46) [Quotes first from Isaiah 56:7 and then Jeremiah 7:11]

You may have heard/been told that Jesus is angry at the "marketplace" atmosphere – the buying and selling and cheating and taking advantage of the people whose animal sacrifices were deemed imperfect. And there's some truth to this explanation of the source of Jesus' anger.

But what about the fact that the whole "Temple" vibe (religious atmosphere) was just too busy and bustling? What if it's about more than greed? What if over the years Jesus has noticed that the actual reason for the Temple – connecting/reconnecting people with the Living God – had been lost in all the busy "duties" of the religious leaders? The Law and the carrying out of it wasn't helping people connect to God and each other as much as it was obscuring God's steadfast love and faithfulness. Things were moving and shaking (attendance was up and the parking lot was full), but in all the wrong ways.

Instead of praying, people were powering-up. They were busy posturing for leadership positions. They were performing spiritually, for the applause and approval of others. They were loading the people down, piling on rules and regulations. They were prohibiting certain people (the “blind and the lame” are mentioned specifically in Matthew) from the Temple proper; declaring they weren’t good enough. They were doing everything but PRAY, at least not in the way Jesus prayed and invited others to pray with Him.

Let’s talk for just a moment about prayer as the central act of **staying grounded** in the Kingdom of God; **staying centered on** His will for our lives. What if we entered prayer, not just to get stuff from God or show others we’re spiritual or ask God to bless the work we do for Him, but to be still (and quiet) enough to hear Him remind us that we are His Beloved sons and daughters? What if prayer was the one non-negotiable that helped us fight against the lie that says ‘we need to do more’ for God and others to love and accept us? What if prayer was the revolutionary posture of living in the peace/wholeness/Shalom of God SO THAT nobody could talk us into complying with any other agenda and authority than that of King Jesus? What if prayer was our first and best strategy for changing everything back to the way God intended in the beginning?

Almost forty years ago – when some problems in our country were mild compared to now – Eugene Peterson wrote, “Most do not see prayer as the central and essential action to remedy the mess that we are in. Prayer is understood rather as a private, “in-house” activity. When it does occur in the public sector it is ceremonial.” (Eugene Peterson in *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms That Summon You From Self to Community*) “Ceremonial” is certainly one accurate description of temple prayer in those days. Hypocritical would be another. Insincere, talkative, busy, unfocused, self-centered . . . I could go on and on. But I’m not just describing temple prayer 2000 years ago. I’m talking about my own prayer life over the years.

How do we go from “focused on Christ” to a life with no focus at all?
How do we go from being clear about God’s will to confused and, ultimately, disobedient?

The answer is no prayer; prayer and stillness that is. Sitting still in prayer is harder than we might think. I’ve been sharing more recently how I am just scratching the surface of what it means to be still and listen while I pray. Our growing immersion in Emotionally Healthy Spirituality is helping me along in this journey. Listening creates space to hear God tell us who we are . . . so that we don’t have to worry so much about who others say we are. If we fail to create quiet places and never learn to literally silence the voices in our heads, then it will be almost impossible to hear God declare our true identity; and then just about anything will be possible . . . and I don’t mean that in a good way.

As followers of Jesus, knowing our true identity IS WHAT GROUNDS US. And only people who are deeply rooted in King Jesus can stay in Palm Sunday mode. By Palm Sunday mode, I don't mean to suggest that prayerful people always live in Happy Land. Hurricanes and unemployment and cancer and broken families can happen in anybody's life. It's just that people who practice silence and listening in prayer build a stronger foundation to face these difficulties. By Palm Sunday mode I'm talking about not betraying God and others; not falling asleep when it's 'go time' and we're needed most; not crucifying/killing the redemptive work of Jesus in the lives of others..

So what do we do? We must confess our attraction – even in prayer – to clutter and busyness, power and self-centeredness. We must repent of praying ceremonially while hiding our hearts from God and others. In the words of Jean Danielou we must:

Be Free For God

I have a need
of such clearance
as the Savior effected in the temple of Jerusalem
a riddance of clutter
of what is secondary
that blocks the way
to the all-important central emptiness
which is filled
with the presence of God alone.
(Jean Danielou)

One Day, **When Prayer Is Central** – prayer that is slowed-down, full of humble and hungry listening and silence . . . no amount of money/bribery will be able to convince people to do anything that is not of the Kingdom . . . nobody will feel “less than” or “not enough” . . . nobody falls asleep when our prayer and presence matter most . . . and the only things that will be crucified are hypocritical religion and evil itself.

Is prayer central in your life? In my life? In our life together?

“Be still and know that He is God.” (Psalm 46:10)