

A DESPERATE PRAYER

**SERIES: SUFFERING SERVANT,
CONQUERING KING**



Catalog No. 20230319
Mark 14:32-42
Fourth Message
Paul Taylor
March 19, 2023

Mark 14:32-42

Mark 14:32-42:

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” 33 And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. 34 And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” 35 And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. 36 And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” 37 And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? 38 Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” 39 And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. 40 And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. 41 And he came the third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42 Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

This scene of Jesus and his disciples is probably the most intimate portrayal of Jesus’ humanity in the entire New Testament. Jesus, the creator of the Universe—God incarnate—has not one but two requests denied. He pours his heart out, and twice he is told no.

When I started seminary, I worked remotely for Oracle as a software product manager. It was a great provision, but over time I was tired of not seeing anyone in-person and bored with not being able to contribute as much as when I was full-time. So when a local customer at a conference wanted to hire me as a consultant to help them use our software, I was convinced it was going to be the perfect job.

I’d be paid twice as much. I’d work with a small local team. It would be more interesting. It was perfect.

I can still picture the restaurant I was sitting at when my phone rang. The hiring manager told me they were going in a different direction. And I was crushed. All my plans crumbled. I’d have to stay in my job: boring and lonely.

How do you feel when a request is denied? When you ask for something, apply for something or put yourself out there and you are told “no”? What happens within you when you submit a piece of paper and someone stamps it with a big red “DENIED” across the top of it?

We’re currently in the middle of a Lenten series that we’ve called “Suffering Servant, Conquering King.” Seven different scenes from the book of Mark highlight these parallel themes which run throughout the life of Jesus. As we walk through them, we see the glory and the humanity of Jesus.

What you heard read earlier was the account of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane. This was a garden near what’s called the Mount of Olives. In that garden, Jesus asked desperately for two things. He asked his friends to stay awake with him. He asked his Father to spare him the pain that was laid out before him. But his friends fell asleep, and his father said no. Somehow in the midst of that, Jesus carries on courageously. He is at peace. He trust His Father and forgives his friends.

How does he do it? How does somebody face two requests denied from his closest relationships and then walk forward into betrayal, humiliation, and death? As we do whenever we look at Jesus, we’re going to be in awe of him. As the centurion said at the cross, “Truly, this is the Son of God.”

We will also ask how the life that Jesus lived can be reproduced in us. For those of us who count ourselves as followers of Jesus, how can we walk with him in such a way that we live life like him?

This is one of my favorite stories about Jesus. He is remarkable—real and honest and in pain, but obedient and faithful and courageous at the same time. Combining both of those is rare.

We're going to look at this passage from three different angles. First, we'll examine the requests that Jesus makes. What do they mean? Why is he asking for these things? Then, we'll consider his willingness to submit. How does he handle the fact that he is turned down? Finally, we'll reflect on the response of the disciples. How do they react, and what can we learn from them?

The request

In our story this morning, we heard Jesus speak five times: four to his disciples and once to his Father. Each of them was a request. He's not preaching or teaching, or exhorting anyone. He is asking for something. He asks something of his disciples. He asks something of his Father. Let's look at the request of his friends first. Here's what he asks:

“Sit here while I pray” (v.32).

“Remain here and watch” (v.34.)

“Watch and pray” (v.38)

This is a different side of Jesus than we usually see. It's softer and more vulnerable. Jesus seems needy in a way that he hasn't before. He is about to face something really difficult, so he asks for support as he goes into it. He says, “I'm having a hard time; would you be with me in it?”

Does it seem crazy to you that the incarnate God who created the universe would ask this of his friends? And yet, this is a Jesus we can relate to. We see a man who needs his friends in a moment of crisis. That's deeply human. It draws us to him, partly because we have a hard time being this vulnerable with each other.

I was talking to a married couple in crisis one time. The husband felt like he had to do everything, like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. And he wasn't doing a very good job. So I asked him, “What would it look like to ask your wife for help? To tell her that you need her?” He paused and looked back at me, and said, “I could never do that.”

The truth is that many of us have a hard time asking for help when we need it. It's too vulnerable. Too weak. We don't want to inconvenience people. So it's remarkable to see Jesus doing this.

But he doesn't just ask his disciples for something; he also asks God Himself. Here's the request that he makes of God. We hear it described, and then we hear an actual quote.

He prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him (v.35.)

“Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me” (v36).

Jesus uses two words in his request that are particularly significant. He talks about the hour and the cup.

First, he asks that the hour might pass from him. But a few verses later, he says that the hour has come. That's how we know that his request is denied.

Then he uses the image of the cup to refer to the painful events that he will face. Not long before, he asked the disciples in Mark 10:38, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” He told them they would drink the cup. But now he's asking that his cup be taken away. He's asking for a change of plans.

What we see here is a rare glimpse into the heart of Jesus. In the gospel of Mark, we've heard about Jesus going away in the mornings to pray. But we haven't heard what he prays. This is the first time we get to listen in on a conversation between Jesus and the Father. It's a unique gift. And it comes as a huge surprise.

In the narrative of the Bible, the whole story has led up to this moment, from the first prediction of victory over death in the garden of Eden to the foreshadowing of the Messiah's death in the stories of the Old Testament to the prophets describing a salvation which would come from a suffering servant. God's entire plan for the world has been a preparation for what is about to happen.

Is Jesus really asking whether there is another way? Does he really dare to ask his Father to take the cup away from him? It would appear so.

Theologically, this passage is one of the most perplexing in the Bible. It stretches our ability to understand what it means that Jesus is fully God and

fully human at the same time. I don't think we can quite put all the pieces together. It's just too complicated for us. But the text is clear: Jesus asks for a different path right when God's plan is about to come together.

There are a lot of things we can conclude from this passage. We can marvel at Jesus. We can dwell on the theological mystery. But as a very concrete application point, watching Jesus do this means we can ask God for anything. Nothing is off-limits to ask for. Ask God for what you want.

At first glance, we might think that we do this. We're always asking God for stuff. Help me get this job; bring healing to my mother; find me a parking spot (I pray a lot for parking spots); guide me in this decision; etc. We ask God for a lot of things.

But I think we are sometimes afraid to ask God for what we really want. We focus on the surface things going on in our lives. But do we really make ourselves vulnerable before him? I think many of us simply hide. We hide our needs from our friends, and we hide our needs from God. We're like that person I counseled who was brave enough to admit, "I could never ask my wife for help."

Jesus asked passionately in a desperate moment of need. Here's how the author of Hebrew describes it.

Hebrews 5:7:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

Jesus offered his prayers with loud cries and tears. This is the model for us. Notice that he was heard, but his request was denied.

To the extent that we're afraid to ask God for what we want, I think it's because we're afraid he'll say no. We're afraid that our requests are too small or too big, or too outside of his plan. So we keep them to ourselves. Somehow Jesus manages to ask and, at the same time, to accept that his request might be denied. How did he do that? How did he deal with the possibility that his request would be denied?

The submission

We've seen how passionately Jesus asked. Now let's look at how willingly he submits. First, we see him come in desperate vulnerability to the Father. He asks for what he wants. But in the same breath, we see him accept the will of the Father in complete submission.

I suggested that some of us tend to hide our needs. We are afraid to ask for what we want. But, sometimes, we do the opposite. We bring our needs to God, but we demand that he goes along with our plan. We say that we're asking, but what we're really doing is insisting on our way. If God says no, we're angry and hostile.

We hide or demand. And this is what makes this picture of Jesus so incredible. Jesus is somehow able to ask and submit at the same time. He doesn't hide his desire, but neither does he insist on it—that's a powerful combination.

This comes out through Jesus' simple statement to the Father. He asks for what he wants, but then he adds,

"Yet not what I will, but what you will" (v. 36).

Eight words in Greek. Literally translated, "But not what I desire, but what you."

This resonates with how Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Jesus teaches us to say, "May your will be done on earth, in the same way that it's done on heaven." "May your will be done on earth." I pray this regularly, and whenever I do, it's an acknowledgment that God's will and my will are two different things. And I'm specifically asking that God's will be done. I would love it if my will and God's will were aligned. Since I'm not sure they do, this is a prayer of submission and obedience.

How is Jesus able to do this? How is he able to ask and submit at the same time? What gives him the freedom to ask and the obedience to submit? I think it's grounded in his intimate relationship with the Father. He knows the Father in such an intimate way that he is at the same time convinced of the Father's deep and unbending love for him. He feels safe enough to be completely vulnerable before him. But he also has complete faith in the Father's will as the best possible option. He trusts God and His plan for the world completely.

To show you what I mean, I need a volunteer. I'm going to ask you to come up, and I have a few questions

for you. They have to do with driving, so you only need a driver's license for this illustration.

[Volunteer with driver's license]

I have a few questions for you: First, how many pedals does your car have? Second—and this is the important one—which pedal do you press when you want to stop?

Are you ever tempted to press the other pedal when you want to stop? Does it require an enormous amount of self-discipline to force yourself to press that pedal when you want to stop? Why or why not?

I'm guessing you are never tempted to press the other pedal when you want to stop. It doesn't take a lot of discipline to force yourself to press the correct pedal. Perhaps early on, when you were learning to drive, you got confused and pressed the wrong pedal. But now, you are fully convinced that pressing the left pedal will cause the car to stop, and you probably never wonder whether you might be able to get the car to stop by pressing the pedal on the right.

Thanks for being willing to help.

Here's the point. Pressing the correct pedal comes naturally because this person is so convinced in the core of their being that this is how the car works. He has no doubts about which pedal will do what he wants, so it doesn't require a lot of discipline to choose the right one.

I think that was the case for Jesus. I think he knew the Father so intimately and trusted him so deeply that submitting to the Father's will wasn't a tremendous act of self-discipline. It came naturally. His agony in the garden was not forcing himself to submit. It was the simple grief of knowing he would face something incredibly difficult.

That's how Jesus was able to combine those two things so seamlessly. It was all rooted in the depth of his relationship with the Father. So that becomes the invitation to us. We can ask God for what we want, and we can submit to his will. Ask and submit.

If we doubt that God is good and don't think His plan for the world will end up for our good, then submitting our will to his becomes a teeth-gritting exercise in forcing ourselves to do something that seems completely contrary to reason.

But, on the other hand, if we really believe that the God of the universe has our best interest at heart and is working in this world for our good, then submitting to his will is a no-brainer. Why would we do anything else? Why would we fight for our way if we really believe that God is good and all-powerful? It's really hard to submit to someone you don't trust. But it makes all the sense in the world to submit to someone all-powerful whom you trust completely.

So don't force yourself to submit. Deepen your relationship with God. Learn to trust him. Open yourself up to him and become vulnerable to him and to others.

Submission is a big part of following Jesus. We have to learn to submit. The New Testament tells us to submit to each other, to submit to our leaders, and to submit to God. But the secret of submission doesn't lie in the strength of your will. It lies in the depth of your trust. As we trust God, we can submit not only to him but to everyone he asks us to submit to.

This is what Jesus was able to do. But Jesus discovered what many of us have experienced as well. Submitting to God can sometimes be a very lonely experience.

The disciples

We began by looking at the requests that Jesus made. He asked his disciples to watch and pray. He asked his Father if there was another way to complete the plan. Then we saw how he submitted to his Father. Now we'll reflect on how the disciples responded to his request.

Three times Jesus came back to find them sleeping.

And he came and found them sleeping (v.37)

And again he came and found them sleeping (v.40)

And he came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?" (v.41)

This is not a good look for the disciples. Three times Jesus asked them to keep watch. Three times they fell asleep. It's actually kind of unbelievable how terrible it is. He takes Peter, James, and John with him to go a bit further than the others. Then he goes a bit further still. But it seems like he is still within earshot. They record what he says. Jesus is offering prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears. His best friends hear this

happening. And they fall asleep. What did they do? Put earplugs in so Jesus' agonizing prayers didn't keep them awake?

Their sleep stands in stark contrast to Jesus' wakefulness. The contrast is meant to be highlighted. The worst part is when you hear the disappointment in Jesus' voice as he talks to Simon Peter. "Could you not stay awake even one hour?"

Think about what's happening. This is one of the most significant theological moments in the unfolding of God's plan. Ever since sin tarnished the perfect creation of God, history has been leading up to the point when the incarnate Son of God will take on the brokenness of all humanity, bear the punishment for sin, and redeem all of creation. Just before it happens, the Son of Man has a moment of vulnerability. He asks his closest relationships for comfort and relief. History hangs in the balance of this moment.

And his best friends can't keep their eyes open.

I think we are meant to see ourselves in the disciples. You know that feeling, don't you? When you just can't keep your eyes open? It's a terrible feeling to fight sleep. Mark says their eyes were heavy. I've had that experience when I'm sometimes driving—I'm exhausted and bored, and my eyes just want to close, but I have to fight with all my energy to keep them open.

We know the feeling that overcame the disciples. We are meant to be shocked at them but to sympathize with them at the same time. Jesus is asking passionately and courageously, submitting to His Father. His disciples are sleeping on the sidelines.

I think we're meant to ask, "What are we sleeping through?"

Here's the instruction that Jesus gives his disciples, "Watch and pray in order that you may not fall into temptation." He adds this acknowledgement "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."

Several commentators have pointed out that this seems to be what he himself is experiencing. His spirit is willing—"but not what I desire but what you." But his flesh is weak—"take this cup from me". His solution is to watch and pray. That's what we've seen him doing. So he gives the same instruction to his disciples. Their flesh is weak even though their Spirit is willing, so the solution

is the watch and pray. If you do that, you won't fall into temptation and sleep through what God is doing.

I appreciate that the instruction is to avoid temptation, not to fight it. Did you hear that? We're told to avoid temptation, not fight it. It's the same thing in the Lord's Prayer, "Do not lead us into temptation." Jesus is aware that our flesh is weak, so the solution is to avoid temptation whenever possible.

That makes a ton of sense. If you're trying to lose weight, I wouldn't recommend going on a cruise. It doesn't make sense to say: Go on a cruise. Walk past the buffets heaped with food 24 hours a day and only eat salads the entire time. It's stupid to put yourself in a place where you will face extreme temptation.

That leaves us with one final exhortation. It's what Jesus said to his disciples. I think it's what he says to us as well. Watch and pray.

For the disciples, this watching was defensive. Part of what they were watching for was the betrayer coming to lead Jesus to his trial. But for us, I think watching and praying means more about being on the lookout for what God is doing in your life. Pay attention. Nothing just happens. God is active. He's active in your work relationships: in your frustration with your boss, your project that seems complicated, your interactions with co-workers and clients and partners. God is active everywhere. You just have to look for it.

Don't sleep through the work of God. Watch and pray.

Conclusion

Think back to the job that I didn't get. My sense of disappointment and denial. I really wanted that job. It was crushing not to get it. Maybe some of you have been there. Maybe you're there now.

The pattern that Jesus gives us in the garden of Gethsemane is a powerful one. He asks for what he wants. He submits to God's will, and he invites us to watch and pray. Taken together, that's a great approach to life. Ask. Submit. Watch. Pray. They all work together.

I want to give you a chance to put this sermon into practice. I want to invite you to ask for what you want. Maybe it's something you've been asking for already. Maybe it's something new. Maybe it's something you've been holding back.

I'll open us in prayer and then give you time to pray silently. Having asked for what we want, we'll close together with the refrain, "May your will be done." Ask and submit.

Let's pray.