

Intro:

Read texts:

Matthew 14:22 ¶ And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away.²³ And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.

Mark 6:45 ¶ And straightway he constrained his disciples to get into the ship, and to go to the other side before unto Bethsaida, while he sent away the people.⁴⁶ And when he had sent them away, he departed into a mountain to pray.

Our texts refer to the moments immediately after the feeding of the 5000. Last time we looked at the same event and considered our Lord's prayer of thanksgiving before that remarkable banquet.

After the meal was over, the Lord sent the disciples away and he sent the crowd away. Then he retired to the mountain to pray *alone*.

So our subject today is **Private Prayer**. I have given our message this title:

Jesus Withdrew to Pray

Robert Murray M'Cheyne said this concerning the importance of private prayers, especially early in the morning:

I ought to pray before seeing any one. Often when I sleep long, or meet with others early, it is eleven or twelve o'clock before I begin secret prayer. This is a wretched system. It is unscriptural. Christ arose before day and went into a solitary place. David says: "Early will I seek thee"; "Thou shalt early hear my voice." Family prayer loses much of its power and sweetness, and I can do no good to those who come to seek from me. The conscience feels guilty, the soul unfed, the lamp not trimmed. Then when in secret prayer the soul is often out of tune, I feel it is far better to begin with God — to see his face first, to get my soul near him before it is near another. — Robert Murray M'Cheyne¹

Our Lord certainly gave us an example of someone who took time for private prayers. I don't think any of us denies this. What we want is some idea of how to go about having fruitful prayers.

¹ Edward M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999).

Notice:

1. I don't seek 'successful' prayers — what are those?
2. I don't seek 'powerful' prayers — how can those be made? [I do desire power in prayer, but that is a different matter.]
3. I do want *fruitful* prayers.

This message, then, is about taking some thought to practical matters in making our prayers more fruitful.

One other thing before we begin: the things we are going to talk about are suggestions, not laws. Find a way to implement *some* of these suggestions and you will find much fruitfulness in your prayers.

I. A first principle of a fruitful prayer life is to take time for it — take much time, as much as you can

A. The crush of common life demands regular time for prayer

1. Nothing wrong with a quick prayer 'on the fly'
2. But much prayer empowers the quick prayer

“Much time spent with God is the secret of all successful praying. Prayer which is felt as a mighty force is the mediate or immediate product of much time spent with God. Our short prayers owe their point and efficiency to the long ones that have preceded them.”²

B. Our scriptural precedents

1. The Lord often spend whole nights in prayer
2. The apostle Paul also laboured night and day in prayer
3. Daniel prayed three times a day without fail

C. Other examples

1. Charles Simeon, 1759-1836, a well-known English clergyman is said to have prayed from 4 am to 8 am every day
2. John Wesley spent two hours every morning in prayer, beginning at 4 am

D. Complaints about the pressure on prayer time

1. William Wilberforce, British politician, leader of anti-slavery movement

² Ibid.

This perpetual hurry of business and company ruins me in soul if not in body. More solitude and earlier hours! I suspect I have been allotting habitually too little time to religious exercises, as private devotion and religious meditation, Scripture-reading, etc. Hence I am lean and cold and hard. I had better allot two hours or an hour and a half daily. I have been keeping too late hours, and hence have had but a hurried half hour in a morning to myself. Surely the experience of all good men confirms the proposition that without a due measure of private devotions the soul will grow lean. But all may be done through prayer — almighty prayer, I am ready to say — and why not? For that it is almighty is only through the gracious ordination of the God of love and truth. O then, pray, pray, pray! — William Wilberforce³

2. Henry Martyn (1781-1812), Anglican missionary to India and Persia — in six short years of missionary work, he translated the NT into Urdu [official language of Pakistan, one of 23 official languages in India], Persian, and Judaeo-Persic

Henry Martyn laments that “want of private devotional reading and shortness of prayer through incessant sermon-making had produced much strangeness between God and his soul.”⁴

What are we to say about our own prayer time?

- On the whole, it is too short (if it exists consistently at all)

May God move in us to take much time for prayer!

II. A second principle of a fruitful prayer life is to make time for it — the best time, for quality time

- A. The testimony of the Scriptures for mornings in prayer

Psalm 5:3 My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O LORD; in the morning will I direct *my prayer* unto thee, and will look up.

Psalm 88:13 But unto thee have I cried, O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Psalm 119:147 I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word.

Psalm 130:6 My soul *waiteth* for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: *I say, more than* they that watch for the morning.

- B. The testimony of the Scriptures (and of men) are not a law, but an observation
1. The great saints of the past who accomplished much for God prayed early
 2. A great heart for God will display itself in eagerness to meet with God at the beginning of the day

“A desire for God which cannot break the chains of sleep is a weak thing and will do but little good for God after it has indulged itself fully. The desire for God that keeps so far behind the devil and the world at the beginning of the day will never catch up.”⁵

III. A third principle of a fruitful prayer life is to plan your time — deliberation and readiness reap rich fruit in your soul

- A. The value of a prayer journal – names, dates, answers
- B. The value of planned sessions of prayer
1. “How to Spend a Day in Prayer” by Lorne Sanney
 - a. Plan for a half-day or a day in prayer
 - 1) A time of extended fellowship with God [partnership]
 - 2) A time to gain a renewed perspective
 - 3) A time to catch up on intercession
 - 4) A time for prayerful self-evaluation
 - 5) A time for purposeful preparation
 - b. Thoughtful preparation
 - 1) Time and location (undistracted)
 - 2) Tools:
 - a) Bible

⁵ Ibid.

- b) Notebook (and writing instrument!)
- c) Hymnal
- d) Devotional book (*Power Through Prayer*, E. M. Bounds; others)

c. Keys

- 1) Wait on the Lord: Don't hurry
- 2) Make notes as you read, pray, read, pray

The Lord may bring to mind something you need to get right with someone else. Make a note of it ... and do it.

- 3) Worship the Lord in your prayers
- 4) Set 'seasons' to your time in prayer
 - a) Personal meditation (about one third)
 - b) Prayer for others (one third)
 - c) Prayer for personal needs (one third)

Such an event won't be an every day event, but they could be (should be) a somewhat regular event. How about the first day of your vacation? [If you take one!]

For some, extended times away can be difficult to arrange, especially if you have young children. But find ways for extended, personal, private devotion.

2. Prepared prayers (with discernment!) – as a regular part of daily prayer

Face to Face Praying the Scriptures for Intimate Worship — Kenneth Boa

“Spiritual growth is impossible apart from the practice of prayer. Just as the key to quality relationships with other people is time spent in communication, so the key to a growing relationship with the personal God of heaven and earth is time invested in speaking to Him in prayer and listening to His voice in Scripture.

“As central as these twin disciplines of prayer and Scripture are to our spiritual life, most believers in Christ are frustrated by hit-or-miss approaches to both. As a result, their time in prayer and the word can become unsatisfying, routine, and even boring. It is no surprise,

then, that most people spend a minimal amount of time in either of these disciplines and fail to develop intimacy with the One for whom they were created.

“The problem with prayer is heightened by the fact that people often succumb either to the extreme of all form and no freedom, or the opposite extreme of all freedom and no form. The first extreme leads to a rote or impersonal approach to prayer, while the second produces an unbalanced and undisciplined prayer life that can degenerate into a litany of one “gimme” after another. Handbook to Prayer [old name] was designed to make prayer a more enriching and satisfying experience by providing both form and freedom in the practice of prayer.”⁶

Conclusion:

Above all, be certain to take time for private prayer:

Matthew 6:5 ¶ And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites *are*: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.⁶ But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

Remember, what we are after is fruitfulness in prayer.

- That doesn't come about so much from our public prayers.
- And the power of our public prayers are linked to our private prayers.

I am convinced that we labour under a weakness in our prayers – we all need to make better choices concerning our private prayer life.

⁶ Kenneth Boa, *Handbook to Prayer : Praying Scripture Back to God* (Atlanta: Trinity House, 1997, c1993).