

Spiritual Warfare Sermon 14: Ephesians 6:18: Praying and temptation

OUTLINE

Christ's praying in Gethsemane
Christ's teaching in Gethsemane

INTRODUCTION

The greatest spiritual warrior to have walked the earth is Christ. He never gave in to one temptation; He faced greater temptations than anyone will ever face, and He is our teacher as we turn from the spiritual armour to the importance of prayer in spiritual warfare. As we read through the gospels we come across a life saturated in prayer. He would get up early and pray, Mk. 1:35; He would pray in private, Lk. 9:18; He prayed at His baptism, Lk. 3:21-22; and before He ate, Matt. 14:19. He prayed all night when facing important decisions like choosing His disciples, Lk. 6:12; He would withdraw in the middle of busy times when people were crowding to see and hear Him, Lk. 5:15-16; and after a very hard day's work would follow up the day with prayer, Mk. 6:46; He prayed for Peter who was about to go through testing Lk. 22:32; in Gethsemane three times before He faced the cross, Matt. 26:36, and while He was dying, Lk. 23:34, 46.

Ephesians 6:18-20, 'praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, 19 and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.' Many have thought that prayer is the last piece of the armour, but it has been pointed out that Paul does not call us to put it on. Rather it is to be viewed as something that should attend every other part. That we prayerfully wear the belt of truth, the breastplate, take up the shield, etc. It is as if Paul is saying that without prayer all the armour is in fact useless. There is much that we need to draw from this text with regards to prayer. We need to discuss the nature of prayer, the types of prayer, persevering prayer, praying for the word, but today, as we are celebrating the Lord's Supper we want to observe Christ who used prayer to overcome temptation in the garden of Gethsemane. We have observed Christ doing warfare with the word, now we will see Him doing warfare with prayer. We move to observe Christ at the time when He would have to face the hardest decision of His life, to willingly embrace God's holy wrath for our sakes. We will see how the Saviour who being fully human turned to God in prayer to help Him wrestle Himself into obedience. We will look at His praying and teaching on prayer in Gethsemane.

Christ's praying in Gethsemane

Mark 14:33-34 (ESV) 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." His anguish was so intense He turned to human company and prayers for aid. The same who would soon deny Him were asked to pray with Him. This reveals the intensity of His need, and reminds us that our prayers are heard though we are not perfect. With everything done that needed to be done, and the only thing remaining now was His death for our sins, with the diverting talk of John 14-17 aside,

the full weight of what was facing Him dawned upon Him. We see Him having to pray three times, an hour a time, with strong cries and tears, Hebrews 5:7 (ESV) "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."

In His prayers He asks for the cup of God's wrath, if possible to be taken away Matthew 26:39 (ESV) "And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." It was only when He prayed the second time that we find a shift from asking for it to be taken, to talk about if there is no other way, 'Your will be done'. Matthew 26:42 (ESV) Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." These words are very full of meaning, not only are we seeing a gargantuan wrestle, but we are seeing the necessity of the cross emphasized. There is no salvation apart from the sacrifice of Christ, no other way of forgiveness possible. This highlights the seriousness of sin, and the importance of preaching Christ to all nations, for there is no other name under heaven given by which we must be saved.

The issue of Christ wrestling in prayer and asking whether God could remove the cup has caused many discussions and even a few errors in Church history. But in particular the question has come up, If Christ is God, and He agrees with God's will, why do we find Him having to wrestle Himself in submission to God. There is no contradiction here at all. We are not viewing Christ wrestle with a sinful desire of wanting to disobey God. No we are viewing Christ wrestle with the very strongest of our human emotions, fear of death/fear of facing God's judgement. Christ was not mortifying a lust but a holy desire. But more than that He was not merely scared of the pain and torture but all that the cross would mean in terms of spiritual pains as well. There have been children martyrs who have faced death with more courage. No! The pain of being cut off from the Father is what He is wrestling with. Christ's human response to what lay ahead of Him was not a sinful one. He was about to face what no man can face. He knew better than any how bad it was really going to be, His response of being overwhelmed is a fitting response to the magnitude of what He was about to face.

In fact it would be profitable to stop and remind ourselves that it is in this human response that we should find our cues for how unbelievers should feel about facing God in judgement. If this is how Jesus, the Son of God trembled at the thought of God's judgement, we would be fools to think we don't need forgiveness of sins and can stand before His holiness without fear of punishment. However, Christ, strengthened by God in prayer wrestled the strongest of human reactions to the ground, bound Himself hand and foot, and surrendered His wriggling human nature for sacrifice. The strongest feelings of fear, self preservation, and the multitude of accompanying emotions were brought in surrender to God. The lesson of wrestling with ourselves in prayer before God should not be lost on us, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, and we are strengthened in prayer.

The point I want to make here is this one. The fight in prayer to bring His holy will which was informed by a full understanding of what it meant to bear the weight of our sin and face God's wrath, is a greater fight then for us to turn away from a most loved sin. The perfect hatred which Christ has towards sin, and the overwhelming desire not to be experience in His psyche a separation from the Father would have been a pure hatred.

When we wrestle with temptation we do not have to wrestle against something we have pure love for but also in part hate. In other words, if Christ whose nature put Him in total opposition from wanting to bear our sin and punishment, and yet He was able to subdue His will and bring Himself into submission to the Father's will in prayer and by the help God provides. How much more will we know help against sins which we already partially hate. Christ hates the notion of becoming our blame and being separated from God more than we love our sins, and He was helped in prayer, this help is available for us as well.

The efforts of His praying were immense, the effects of His looking upon the hell He was to suffer immeasurable. Luke's account is particularly revealing. Luke's account does not reveal that He prayed three times, but instead focuses with a doctor's eye upon particular details that have to do with Jesus state of health. Jesus was so overwrought in prayer possibly after the first or second time that God needed to send angels to strengthen Him, Luke 22:43 (ESV) "And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him." But His praying did not end here with a great sense of peace washing over Him, now with this new energy Luke tells us, Luke 22:44 (ESV) "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." That word 'agony' is a very intense one indicating a state of intense mental focus and distress. This intense focus was no doubt brought about because of Christ's particularly sensitive nature being sinless drawn out at the thought of suffering the full weight of God's wrath. We are standing on holy ground here, looking into a profound mystery, not able to penetrate the depths of His anguish. Then there is the sweat. The language of the text can be interpreted either way, so that it could read as being like great drops of blood, or became great drops of blood. "Although this is a very rare phenomenon, bloody sweat (hematidrosis or hemohidrosis) may occur in highly emotional states or in persons with bleeding disorders. (18, 20) As a result of haemorrhage into the sweat glands, the skin becomes fragile and tender." (http://www.munichurch.de/sermons/2010-03-28_On%20The%20Physical%20Death%20of%20Jesus%20Christ.pdf). Whether He sweat blood or not heaven will reveal, but what we do know is that the disorder Christ was under was so extreme that angels had to minister to Him. I am very happy to accept the view that He sweat blood because it fits with the extreme circumstances He was facing and His response to them. Let it be noted that this horror is the very thing He suffered so that we would never have to. When the unbeliever has to stand before God on judgement day, then they will know what this feels like. Although might I suggest that Christ's experience was worse since being perfect and sinless, and the divine Son who had enjoyed eternal fellowship with the Father, there are dimensions to the suffering that we cannot share. When you and I face God one day it will be with confidence, not self confidence but confidence in what Christ has done.

We must highlight the importance of Christ's efforts in prayer and God's answering Him. Heb. 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.' This verse is no doubt describing the agonies of Gethsemane but reminds us that God did indeed hear and answer. What did the answer look like? Did God give into the human desire for Jesus to escape pain and let Him off the hook? No, Christ was in fact a willing offering for our sins, he did not really want to be let off the hook, His whole life was set on this task, but He needed help to wrestle the greatest human emotions into submission. Notice in the angelic visits how God answered His prayer. The angel visits him

to strengthen Him and with this strength He exerts Himself more fervently in prayer. He enters into deep agony of soul and experiences the bloody sweat, God strengthened Him to pray more earnestly and in prayer He found His full resolve to submit Himself to God. There is indeed deep instruction here for us; we are something like Christ in His experience of being torn in the garden. He was torn between two emotions, granted they were holy emotions; and so are we, though we are torn between holiness and unholiness. He was strengthened in prayer to wrestle with Himself and bring all things into submission to God and prayer works the same way for us.

One other dimension of His suffering in the garden that we have to guess at is the demonic and satanic temptations and oppressions that He faced. The garden of Gethsemane and Eden have been compared by A. W. Pink, "The entrance of Christ into the Garden at once reminds us of Eden. The contrasts between them are indeed most striking. In Eden, all was delightful; in Gethsemane, all was terrible. In Eden, Adam and Eve parleyed with Satan; in Gethsemane, the last Adam sought the face of His Father. In Eden, Adam sinned; in Gethsemane, the Savior suffered. In Eden, Adam fell; in Gethsemane, the Redeemer conquered. The conflict in Eden took place by day; the conflict in Gethsemane was waged at night. In the one, Adam fell before Satan; in the other, the soldiers fell before Christ. In Eden the race was lost; in Gethsemane Christ announced, "Of them whom thou givest me have I lost none" (John 18:9). In Eden, Adam took the fruit from Eve's hand; in Gethsemane, Christ received the cup from His Father's hand. In Eden, Adam hid himself; in Gethsemane, Christ boldly showed Himself. In Eden, God sought Adam; in Gethsemane, the last Adam sought God! From Eden Adam was "driven;" from Gethsemane Christ was "led." In Eden the "sword" was drawn (Gen. 3:24); in Gethsemane the "sword" was sheathed (John 18:11)." (commentary on John). If this comparison holds, then it can be inferred that satan was present as in the garden of Eden seeking to turn Christ away from His work of dying on the cross for us. Trying to tempt Him one last time before He goes to the cross, one last frantic attempt to deter Christ from the very work He had been sent to do. If this is the case then we must observe how in prayer He resisted temptation.

Christ's teaching in Gethsemane

As we look at the gospels we get a clear context for Christ's words to the disciples. It is the night of Jesus arrest, the Last Supper has been instituted and Jesus has prophesied that the disciples will all fall away, Mark 14:26-30. Peter remonstrates that he will not be like the others but will die for Christ, by Jesus makes clear that Peter has an appointment to be tested by satan, Luke 22:31-32. That then is the context they are on the brink of temptation, they are about to encounter a major battle in their spiritual warfare. They find themselves faced with satanic resistance just as we do every day.

Christ must take the action of prayer in preparation for His own trials but He does not neglect to instruct His disciples at this crucial hour. If we take the three synoptic gospels together we see that three times Jesus urges His disciples to watch and pray. At the outset of His praying in Gethsemane He begins by urging them to watch and pray, Luke 22:40, 'And when he came to the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation.'" He then put into practice His own teaching and being very sorrowful set Himself to prayer. They would be tested for their loyalty to Christ, would they carry their cross and follow Him

to the cross? Would they love Him more than their own lives. Jesus warned them to pray before the test comes that they might be ready to meet it. For it is in prayer that we see His glory clearly, our sins more clearly, our duty more clearly. Christ prays while they sleep.

Christ comes to them after having prayed for one hour and finds them sleeping, Mark 14:37-38, '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.'" They were sleeping, this could have been due to the long evening of teaching, but Luke clarifies that it was due to sorrow 22:45. And then some of the most convicting words in the bible are spoken, 'Could you not watch for one hour?' Notice that Jesus singles out Peter because Peter had boasted that he would not forsake Christ even if it cost him his life. Jesus goes into more detailed teaching about the importance of prayer, 'The spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak.' Note that Jesus credits Peter and the disciples with good intentions. This is true of all Christians they have regenerated hearts who do desire to honour God and be obedient. However, it is not a lack of willingness but power that is the issue, the flesh is weak. And even as Christians we continue to experience the resistance of the flesh, the flesh wars against the Spirit so that we do not do what we want. But there is hope, we can pray and avail ourselves of God's strength and know His help in our weakness. Jesus points to pray as the pre-temptation strengthening we all need or we will only have the strength of our intentions and not God's Spirit to aid us. God has ordered it that we constantly get our strength from Him by dependent prayer, not that we have a life-long reservoir which makes prayer unnecessary. He seeks to teach us and the world that all good things come from Him, that He might get the glory.

Note also the double command to watch and pray. A constant vigilance is fitting given the constant presence of our weakness and enemy. Jesus was calling upon His disciples to watch for the approaching enemy and pray to be ready to face them, but they failed on both counts. Prayer increases our watchfulness and watchfulness makes us more prayerful.

Jesus goes away to pray a second time and upon returning He finds them asleep again. We have no lesson here but the lesson of Christ's silence and permissive will allowing these sleepy disciples to neglect prayer so that they may learn the hard lesson of prayerlessness when they awake. They are wordless and return to sleep.

Jesus prays a third time He returns with a final rebuke, Luke 22:46, 'and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.'" Even as Judas with the posse were approaching Christ seeks to turn His disciples to prayer as preparation for their test. Note the difference between Christ and His disciples as they are faced with Judas and those come to arrest Him. Christ is full of the glory of God, He is in full possession of Himself; He does not resist the arrest though earlier He wanted to have it removed; He puts an end to violence that could have saved Him from that moment and even heals one of His arresters, and is reasonable. But look at the disciples, they ask a question about striking with the sword and await no answer, they cleave off an ear, are rash and run away in fear. Their stand is full of bravado but not holiness. And the test for Peter goes further so that he ends up denying Christ three times before the rooster crows.

The lesson is plain, watch and pray that you enter not into temptation, for the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Turn to prayer, if it is good enough for Jesus it is good enough for you. Heed the council of Christ as He seeks to equip His disciples to meet a severe test. Pray.