

The Covenant Pulpit



Mark 1:29-39

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A Glorious Waste of Time

In 1967, testimony was given before a Senate Subcommittee on time management that projected that increased technologies such as computers, satellites, and robotics would make workers so efficient that the Gross National Product would swell and that the workweek would shrink. It was estimated that by 1985 Americans would be working only 22 hours a week for 27 weeks a year and retire at age 38. The only problem by the 90's would be what to do with all our free time!¹

The thought is almost laughable now. At the outset of the 21st century, we all know that the massive increase of technology has not slowed the pace or intensity of life. For most Americans, life is busier, faster, and more hectic than ever. The futurist David Zach says that we are "...*hyperliving, skimming along the surface of life.*" The postmodern world may not know where it has come from or where it is going; but it is definitely on the move. As a result, time is in great demand. It might just be our greatest commodity.

The fast-paced world in which we live eats our time and dissolves our energy. It also has disastrous effects on our spiritual life. As John Ortberg has pointed out, the danger for followers of Christ today "*is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it.*"² Stopping to pray, to study God's Word, to enjoy God's presence all seem like a waste of time. When the alarm clock buzzes we hit the ground running until late at night when we fall into bed exhausted. We are so used to being active, productive, and efficient that stopping feels so unproductive! But that's exactly what we must do.

Klaus Issler realizes the importance of stopping in order to be with God. Listen to what he says in his book, *Wasting Time with God*:

¹ Cited by Nancy Gibbs in "How America Has Run Out of Time," *Time*. April 24, 1989.

² John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Zondervan), p. 82.

When it comes to developing a deep, trusting relationship with God, efficiency and productivity are not the answer. It's far better to "waste" time with him, to just enjoy being with him. After all, that's how any friendship grows. But making room for God in the midst of our fast-paced lives is not an easy task. Just as time with our best friends can get squeezed out by the rush of activities, so can time with God.

For many, pausing to pray, meditate on Scripture, and worship God seems so unnatural and inefficient. But those who have discovered the freedom of passionately seeking God's presence daily find it to be a glorious waste of time!

No one knew this better than Jesus. When we look at His life, we see that he was never too busy to pursue God's presence in prayer. We also find a cure for the rushed, shallow, and powerless Christian life. In our passage today, we observe Jesus ministering long hours to large numbers of people with great needs. And yet in Mark 1:35 we read the following: *"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."* Jesus had led a very "successful" and "productive" day. He was about to begin another one. However, led by a passion for the Father's presence, he took time early in the morning for prayer. From this we learn that:

"Wasting time" in God's presence is the most productive part of your day. So seek Him first, seek Him alone, and seek him in prayer.

Priority

The first thing that we learn from this passage is that we **must passionately pursue God's presence first**. We are told that Jesus rose *"very early in the morning, while it was still dark"* (v. 35). In other words, he started his day with prayer. It was the first thing he did in the morning. The word for *"early"* in the original refers to the fourth watch of the night somewhere between 3 and 6am. Jesus got a head start on the day so that he would have time to be in the Father's presence before the world began to press in on him.

Jesus was fully God, but we often forget that he was also fully human. And the events of the previous day, even though they were exciting and victorious, had left Jesus exhausted and depleted. So he got up early and went away to be in the Father's presence to refresh himself from the day behind Him and to prepare for the busy day ahead of Him. The passage we are looking at covers a "day in the life of Jesus." It covers roughly a twenty-four hour period from morning on the Sabbath (Saturday for the Jews) until morning on the following day (Sunday).

In Mark 1:29 we read, "*And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.*" Jesus was staying in Capernaum, a fishing village on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Because it was the Sabbath, Jesus went to the synagogue like all the other Jews. Whereas the Temple emphasized offering, the synagogue stressed teaching. It was where the Jews came to hear the Old Testament read and expounded. The interesting thing was that at synagogue, anyone could come forward and teach if asked by the ruler. So Jesus came forward to teach. Mark 1:22 says that "*they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.*" We know that Jesus taught that all the Old Testament laws and prophecies were fulfilled in him, and that the kingdom of God was at hand. So he called everyone to repent and believe the Good News (See Mark 1:15; Luke 4:16-21).

This was no ordinary day at the synagogue, however. AS he was teaching a man with a demonic spirit confronted Jesus. Jesus, using nothing other than his word, commanded the spirit to leave the man. And it did! You can imagine that everyone was stunned, excited, and even a little afraid. Because of this great display of power and authority, we are told that "*at once his fame spread throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee*" (Mark 1:28). Jesus was now popular, sought after, controversial, and in demand.

But his day didn't end there. Sometime around noon, Jesus went to the house of Simon and Andrew (Mark 1:29) for a mid afternoon meal and to enjoy the rest of the Sabbath. At the home, Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a violent fever. The family told Jesus about her. Then Mark tells what happened. "*And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her,*

and she began to serve them” (Mark 1:31). Even lunch time had turned into another ministry opportunity. And Jesus welcomed it gladly.

But Jesus still had much work ahead of him. As the sun began to set, people from all over Capernaum made their way to Simon and Andrew’s home to see Jesus. Mark adds, *“That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered at his door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons, but he would not permit them to speak, because they knew him”* (Mark 1:32-34). Jesus had been teaching, healing, and exorcising demonic spirits morning, noon, and night. No doubt this was Jesus’ calling and joy to do so; but it had to be exhausting. So when he finally does find time to sleep, he cuts it short in order to rise early and seek the presence of the Father in prayer. And there are at least two reasons why he did so.

First, Jesus made time for prayer because *he knew that the demands of the day would crowd it out*. He knew that no matter how many people he healed or helped, there would always be more. Even after his death and resurrection, when he would ascend to the Father’s side, there would still be more diseases, more poverty, more illness, and more spiritual oppression. He lived under no illusion that he as one person (the Messiah though he was) could fix every problem of every person in the world. No matter how many people he helped, there would always be more. On the other hand, if he didn’t stay close to the Father in prayer, he would lose the strength, joy, and focus that made his life so powerful and effective.

Sure enough, his time of prayer that morning was interrupted by the demands and burdens of the day. Mark writes, *“And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you”* (Mark 1:36-37). That’s exactly why Jesus got up and left early to pray. Because he knew that if he didn’t get a head start on the day, the day would get a head start on him.

Now the Bible does teach that we should pray without ceasing (I Thessalonians 5:17), and Jesus did. However, Jesus also knew that it is necessary that we set aside a portion of our time to simply seek God’s presence, or it will be very difficult to pray

continuously throughout the day. This is ultimately a matter of stewardship. We must give a portion, the first and best portion of our time to the Lord if we are to be his faithful and fruitful servants.

Secondly, Jesus made time for prayer because *he knew that he would always have enough time to do what the Father had called him to do*. Recently a guest speaker, Don Riley, came to our church to teach on the topic of discipling men. Something he said really stuck with me. On the topic of time management he said, "You will never have enough time to do all the things *you* want to do. You will never have enough time to do all the things *others* want you to do. But you will always have enough time to do the things *God* wants you to do." Jesus would agree. He knew that God is not a cruel task master like Pharaoh who demanded that the Hebrew slaves increase their production of bricks while he cut back on their supplies (Exodus 5:8-11). God will not require of you more than time will allow. So if you let God set your schedule, anything that doesn't fit on that schedule must not be worth doing. If set aside time in the morning to seek God's presence, I firmly believe that you will get everything done that God intends for you, and you will use your time more effectively and efficiently. Wasting time in God's presence is the most productive part of your day.

The practice of passionately pursuing God's presence first thing in the morning has also been the practice of all effective servants of Christ down through the ages. David wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that "*Blessed in the man*" (or woman) whose "*delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates both day and night*" (Psalm 1:1-2).

He also wrote "*O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I direct my prayer to you and watch*" (Psalm 5:1). Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel, Paul, Peter all knew the importance of "wasting" time in God's presence in the midst of a busy and demanding schedule.

Figures from church history like Martin Luther and Hudson Taylor also knew the importance of this, and practiced it. Billy Graham, once told the story of his father-in-law, Dr. Nelson Bell, who served as the only doctor in a 400-bed hospital in China. His practice was to rise every morning at 4:30am and spend two hours or more in Bible reading and prayer. Billy Graham added

that, *“People wondered at the holiness and the greatness in his life.”* But this principle is not true just for prophets and pastors and missionaries. It’s true for every follower of Christ.

When we see the life of Jesus, we learn that *“wasting”* time in God’s presence is crucial. So seek Him first. Make it your highest priority on a daily basis. The Christian who would be effective in Christ’s service must be willing to waste time in God’s presence.

Privacy

Not only must we seek God first thing in the morning, but we must also **passionately pursue God’s presence alone**. Notice that verse 35 says Jesus not only got up early to pray, he also went way by himself to pray: *“...he departed and went out to a desolate place to pray.”* Why is that? Why didn’t Jesus stay at home to pray? Why didn’t he bring the disciples with Him? Again Jesus is fully human, even though he is fully divine. People and what they demand of you, whether you are an introvert or an extrovert, take their toll on you. Sure, loneliness is detrimental, but overexposure to people and their pressing needs from you can sap your energy and distort your focus. Jesus knew this and felt it acutely after a long, tiring day of ministry. So he went away alone. Being alone in the Father’s presence also allowed Jesus to really focus on Him without any distractions or burdens. Notice though that Jesus always *“withdrew”* from people, but he never hid. There is a big difference. And he was always willing to be interrupted. He never rebuked or turned away people who pursued him.

Jesus also instructed all his followers in the importance of being alone with God. *“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you”* (Matthew 6:6). When we seek God’s presence just to be with Him, because we have a passion for his presence, and not to appear righteous in front of others, we are blessed. When we seek God for God alone, we find Him! Secret, private prayer is motivated by nothing other than to meet with God and to bear one’s soul in honesty to Him.

I believe Jesus went away to the privacy of that *“desolate place”* for several reasons. First, Jesus pursued the Father’s

presence alone *to restore his strength and power*. As we already mentioned, Jesus' schedule was demanding and tiring. The humanity in him needed things like food, water, and rest like anyone else. His spiritual strength also needed to be renewed and refreshed. Jesus was encouraged and energized by being in the Father's presence. And it was the anointing with the Holy Spirit that made his ministry so effective. His strength came from the Father. And so he sought him passionately each day, and he sought him alone. Jesus was fulfilling what Isaiah wrote about him: *"The Lord God has given me the tongue of those that are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught"* (Isaiah 50:4). The reason Jesus' teaching was so effective and astonishing, was that the Father daily, morning by morning, awakened the ear of Jesus.

We also need to be refreshed daily in God's presence. He is our strength. If we are to truly glorify God in every thing we do, we must seek his presence in search of strength and wisdom and grace. As Jesus told us, *"Apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). However, we can also say with Paul, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"* (Philippians 4:13). If we would be used by God, we must stay "plugged in" to Him. One of the ways we do that is by "wasting" time in his presence. The longer your to-do list, the more necessary it is for you to be strengthened in God's presence each day.

Secondly, Jesus also pursued the Father's presence alone *to be reminded of the Father's love*. I know that in the midst of the spiritual battles that raged around him and the opposition that came at him, Jesus never became burdened or discouraged because he was reminded every day of God's love. I believe that every time Jesus prayed and entered God's presence he heard those awesome words from his baptism, *"You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"* (Matthew 3:17). Having left the Father's side in heaven, Jesus longed to be with Him again and to share the love and glory that they once shared. Being alone in the Father's presence was a glorious refuge from the hostility of the world and the burdens of the day.

How much more do we need to be reminded of God's love every day. Following Christ is not always a joyride. Life in general

can be a lonely tough road to walk. So we need to get away, to “waste” time in the Father’s presence alone.

Finally, Jesus pursued the Father’s presence alone *to refocus on his calling*. Because so many needs and requests came at Him constantly and from every direction, it was imperative that Jesus always stay focused on his mission. Jesus was never unclear about why he came, and that’s because of his commitment to prayer. Because he had his vision refocused daily, he could prioritize his time, and choose effectively between the many things that came his way. This is why when Simon Peter and the others interrupted his prayer time to say, “Everyone is looking for you!” (Mark 1:37), Jesus was able to stay focused and not just give in to the demands of the crowds. He responded, “*Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out. And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons*” (Mark 1:38-39).

If we want to know how to spend our time most effectively for Christ, we must “waste” time in his presence alone. Only then will we be serving Him and the cacophony of voices calling us in every direction. We must seek his presence first and seek his presence alone, but there is a third way in which we must “waste” time in His presence.

Prayer

Last but not least, we must **passionately pursue God’s presence in prayer**. Notice that Mark tells us that Jesus not only got up early and went away to a private place, but he also adds, “*and there he prayed*” (Mark 1:35). This should seem obvious, but it is possible to be in God’s presence, to study your Bible, and yet never pray!

The verb for “to pray” here in the original language simply means “to speak to God, talk with God,” or “to ask of God.” Prayer is conversation. It is two ways. We listen to God in his Word, and we speak to him in prayer. We commune with Him. We simply “waste” time in his presence. We let him search our hearts and reveal our sins and our weaknesses, our blind spots and our failures. We also let him remind us of his grace. That he gave his Son to cover our sins. That we are saved by grace and through

faith. That we are his children. That he will never leave us. In prayer we ponder and stand amazed at his glory and greatness. In prayer we praise Him and worship Him.

Sometimes we view prayer as so impersonal and so selfish. Almost as if we were getting candy from a vending machine. We press E-6 and out comes a snickers! Or sometimes prayer is nothing more than bringing our laundry list, to-do list, or prayer list to the Lord, hoping he will bless it. But God doesn't want your prayer list, he wants you! *Prayer is where we come to meet with God and enjoy his presence.*

Nevertheless, in prayer do ask him for the things that we need from him in order to do his will and glorify him in all of life. Prayer is where *the servant of God comes to be served by God.* As the Apostle Paul reminds us, God is *"not served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life, and breath and everything"* (Acts 17:25). God is glorified and we are blessed when we come to him with all the needs of the coming day and ask for his strength, guidance, and provision. He is also glorified when we come weary from the burdens of the previous day and ask him to encourage us, refresh us, and strengthen us.

What Jesus is modeling for us is not a contemplative, monastic life. Jesus is not showing us that type B personalities are more "godly" than type A's. He is showing us that in order to effectively serve and glorify God, we must be enabled by prayer. The Christian who would be effective in Christ's service must also be willing to "waste" time in God's presence. Life is not a pleasure cruise, it is a battle. And prayer is necessary. As John Piper has said, *"So we see repeatedly in Scripture that prayer is a walkie-talkie for warfare, not a domestic intercom for increasing our conveniences. The point of prayer is empowering for mission."*³ Prayer is where the Christian soldier is equipped and empowered and motivated for battle. It is where the servant of God is served by God that he might more effectively serve for God. "Wasting" time in God's presence as Jesus did is the most productive time of your day. So seek him first, seek him alone, and seek Him in prayer!

The Discovery of George Müller of Bristol

³ *Desiring God* (Multnomah), p. 176.

One man who discovered the power and necessity of wasting time with God was George Müller. Müller was a Prussian born minister who eventually settled in England during the middle of the 19th century. He was a tireless and productive servant of God. He gave himself fully to the mission of “making disciples of all nations.” Müller started *The Scripture Knowledge Institution for Home and Abroad*, which aided missionaries, distributed the Bible, started schools, and helped orphans. But at a very pivotal moment in his life, Müller came to an important realization. In his own words he wrote:

The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend everyday was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not, how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished.

That is the calling of the Christian. That is the cure for the weary, powerless, and bored Christian life. WE must start everyday by getting our soul into a “happy state.” This is the “great and primary business” to which we ought to attend everyday. That is the secret that Jesus so passionately pursued. “Wasting” time in God’s presence is the most productive time of your day. The Christian who would use his time wisely in Christ’s service must “waste” his time daily in God’s presence. What a glorious, happy, and wise waste of time!

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