

# Jesus' Prayer in the Garden/Preparing to Serve

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During our preparations for the Lord's Supper, we consider a wide variety of passages. They all have to do with the Lord Jesus in some way, but it is also true that the Scripture's presentation of Jesus is complex and multifaceted. On one recent Sunday, I invited us to consider not His suffering, but His triumph.

I think it's appropriate for us to do that. It's appropriate for us to contemplate the totality of Jesus as we remember Him. However, it's equally appropriate for us to focus on more traditional Lord's-Supper fare. That's the direction we're going to head this morning. We're going to consider Jesus' prayer in the garden.

## Jesus' Prayer in the Garden

In our study, we're going to turn to what is probably the earliest detailed account of what happened that night in the garden of Gethsemane. It is found in the middle of Mark 14. To my eye, the context breaks down neatly into three divisions, and the first concerns **JESUS' ARRIVAL** in the garden. Read with me from Mark 14:32-36. There are several points in here worthy of mention. The first is Jesus' obvious lack of effort to avoid capture. Not long before, He had practically encouraged Judas to go out and betray Him. Judas knows that the garden of Gethsemane is one of Jesus' favorite haunts; indeed, that's the first place that Judas takes the chief priests' mob to look for Him. Jesus could have pulled a Jonah and headed off to Tarshish instead of waiting, but He waits. He knows what God expects of Him, and He knows that He cannot fulfill those expectations without dying. He cooperates in His own demise.

However, He hardly does so with a light heart. None of us want to think about surrendering our own lives, even for the greatest of causes, and Jesus didn't want to live any less than we do. He had that same animal impulse toward survival that every human does. He was going to obey God, but the thought of what was about to happen left Him sick with sorrow. To me, one of the most striking parts of this text is where Mark tells us that He fell to the ground and began to pray. If you are fortunate, you might think that this is poetic license, that no one is ever so overwhelmed by despair that they can't stand. Not so. I can remember times in my own life when I was so crushed by anguish that I didn't want to stand up anymore either. When Jesus says that He is grieved to the point of death, He is not exaggerating. Inside, He's torn apart.

Jesus' response to this unbearable mental agony, though, is to pray. I've heard of Christians who lost their faith in times of sorrow, but that's never made much sense to me. To me, those times of despair ought to drive us to God because they reveal how hopeless life is without Him. So it is with Jesus.

However, we need to be careful about adopting the "Not My will, but Yours" language in our own prayers. Remember: the reason why this story is so gloomy is because Jesus knows precisely what is going to happen. He knows that it is God's will that He suffer and die on the cross. Prophets have been predicting that this would happen for the past thousand years. It is impossible for Jesus to avoid what is coming without displeasing God, and that's why the contrast between His will and God's will is so stark.

We are very rarely in that position, simply because we rarely know what God's will for some event in our earthly lives is. When we're facing some life-threatening illness, we know that it is appointed to man once to die, but that doesn't necessarily mean it has to happen right now. Rather than using "Not My will, but Yours" as an expression of fatalism, we are much more likely to use it as an expression of doubt, and James tells us that if we ask while doubting, we are certain not to receive what we pray for.

The next segment of this story focuses on **THE DISCIPLES**. Consider Mark 14:37-42. Jesus is anguished, miserable, and probably couldn't sleep even if He tried. The disciples, on the other hand, are vaguely upset because Jesus is upset, but the night that to Jesus is alive with misery is to them confusing, oppressive, and ultimately exhausting. Despite Jesus' repeated exhortations, even His closest apostles, Peter, James, and John, fall asleep. Jesus knows how sternly Peter is about to be tested, but Peter hasn't been paying attention to Jesus' warnings, so he ignores the Lord's rebuke in favor of attending to the needs of his body. Jesus even has to wake them up one last time so they'll be ready to escape when the mob shows up.

This should emphasize the value of spiritual preparedness to us. We too have tests ahead of us, but unlike Peter, we don't even know when they're going to come. The only way we can be ready is if we keep ourselves prepared through vigilance and prayer. If we don't, we'll be caught unawares like Peter was.

The final portion of this story addresses **JESUS' ARREST**. Mark tells the tale in Mark 14:43-50. Judas shows up, mob in tow, goes through an unnecessarily complicated cloak-and-dagger ritual by identifying Jesus with a kiss, as opposed to simply pointing and saying, "Arrest Him!" Peter, still groggy with sleep, takes a mighty whack at one of the high priest's slaves. He probably wanted a head, but what he got was an ear. Before things get any more chaotic, though, Jesus practically surrenders Himself into custody by proclaiming that even this is a fulfillment of prophecy. Once again, He determines what happens.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's contemplate this twofold portrait of our Lord. On the one hand, He is driven to despair by the thought of what is going to happen to Him in the next 24 hours. On the other, though, He displays a love even greater than His sorrow. He's concerned for Peter's spiritual welfare, and as though He is maneuvering a chess piece on the board, He puts Himself in position to be arrested and killed. What looks like a perfect opportunity for the devil to defeat Him is actually a trap that will lead to the defeat of the devil, but Jesus has to be the bait. He stood firm in the test because of His love for God and His love for all of us. Let's remember these things as we partake.

As I am awfully fond of saying, the single biggest challenge we face in the Joliet congregation is lack of elders, and one of our foremost goals as a congregation must be the development of elders. I've decided it's time for me to do my part. We're going to look, then, at what a man must do to prepare to serve.

### **The First Four Goals**

This morning, we're going to be drawing the subject of our study from 1 Timothy 3:1-5. I am aware that the qualifications for an elder extend through v. 7, but not being a novice and having a good reputation aren't really things that a man can directly affect. Also, I see the first qualification, "blameless" as less a qualification itself than as a subject heading which the other qualifications define.

Within the remaining qualifications, the first that we come to is that the would-be elder must be **THE HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE**. We've talked about this extensively from the perspective of qualification. Now, let's look at it from the perspective of preparation. I have said before and I believe still that this qualification isn't a matter of math, of counting up the number of wives a man has. Instead, it raises the question of whether he is a one-woman man, whether he exemplifies sexual faithfulness and self-control.

This reading has two main applications. First, it points out that the man who would be an elder cannot be an adulterer. I wish that this would go without saying, but sadly, I know personally of cases where an elder in the Lord's church was discovered having an affair. That's disgraceful, and if any man desires the office of elder someday, he must take care to keep his life free of infidelity.

This is true, though, not merely of physical adultery, but also of adultery in the heart. There are plenty of Christian men out there who would never take the risk of actually cheating on their wives but frequently engage in the supposedly safer sin of lust. Brethren, those who would if they could aren't one-woman men either. Lust is never godly, whether it is directed toward flesh and blood or toward pixels on a smartphone screen. Our bodies need to belong to our wives, and our hearts need to belong to them too.

Next, we learn from Paul that an elder must be **STEADY**. Under this umbrella, I would group together the qualifications of temperance, sober-mindedness, and good behavior. All three of those are different perspectives on the same character trait. We've all known impulsive people. They are given to gigantic emotional swings, from exultation to despair and back again. They're fascinated by dramatic ideas and wild schemes, and they don't have any problem with pushing their crazy notions on everybody else in Bible classes and business meetings. Their behavior is equally erratic. Sometimes, they'll do really impressive, godly things, but at other times, their conduct makes you want to bury your head in your hands. Men like this can create quite a stir in the church, but they aren't suited for service as elders.

Instead, the man who desires to serve must learn to control his impulses. He needs to learn from experience that a situation is never as bad or as good as it appears, so extreme emotional reactions are hardly ever called for. Similarly, he needs to install a filter between his brain and his mouth, so that rather than blurting out the first thing on his mind, he is able to exercise discretion in his speech and say only things that are well-reasoned and useful. Finally, steadiness means that the would-be elder learns to be equally consistent in his conduct. Rather than being a model Christian one day and an agent of chaos the next, he's dependable, reliable, and someone the members of the congregation trust to carry out God's work.

Third, a man who wants to serve as elder must prepare himself by being **HOSPITABLE**. This is not a common trait in our society. Most Americans would rather fill their lives with celebrity gossip than cultivate relationships with actual, flesh-and-blood people. They're about as likely to invite others into their homes as they are to take up bungee jumping without a cord.

However, this culturally disfavored activity is something that God requires of the men who would lead His church. The reason is simple. We're fond of saying, and rightly so, that the Lord's church isn't a building or a bureaucratic institution. Instead, the church is made up of people, and if the church is made up of people, then leading the church is about leading people. A man who doesn't understand the power of relationships and know how to nurture those relationships isn't fit to serve as an elder.

Showing hospitality is one of the best relationship-nurturing tools known to man. It's simply a part of human nature that if we share a meal with someone and spend that time talking to him, we'll feel closer to him as a result. These days, I almost will not study the Bible with an outsider unless I have a chance to invite him over to our house for a meal first because I've learned that building that trust, building that relationship is so important. It lets him see who I am and where I'm coming from. Hospitality isn't an obligation. It's an opportunity, and only a man who understands and uses that opportunity should be appointed as an elder.

Finally in this section, we learn that the elder must be **ABLE TO TEACH**. This means that those who wish to become elders must learn two things: what to say and how to say it. The "what to say" part is obvious. An elder absolutely must know the word of God. He must have spent enough time with the book that he has taken it into himself and understands it. This is not necessarily true of any man who gets up before the congregation to preach or teach. I've listened to several sermons during which it was obvious to me that the speaker wasn't expressing his own thoughts. Instead, he had found a commentary or a sermon online, and, even if he was using different words, was doing nothing more than repeating what his source had to say. My brother calls a man like that a talking dog. He might be saying something, but he doesn't understand it any better than a dog would. The elder cannot operate at the talking-dog level. Instead, he has to have done his own thinking and be able to present the truth from his own resources.

Second, a man who would serve as elder must be able to present the truth effectively. This does not necessarily mean that he's a whiz at teaching an auditorium Bible classes. I've known more than one elder who was mediocre at the lectern but was extremely effective at the kitchen table. Running a personal study doesn't take the same skills as teaching an adult Bible class, and an elder doesn't have to be good at all of them. There must be, however, some area in which he shows his ability as a teacher.

## The Second Four Goals

It's time for us now to journey into the second half of what Paul says to Timothy about elders. To re-orient ourselves, let's read 1 Timothy 3:3-5. Within this context, the first thing we learn is that the elder must be **SELF-CONTROLLED**. When I was studying this text, I noticed something strange. Paul writes that the elder is supposed to be "not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle". This puzzled me. The not-not-not-but pattern tells me that those four things are supposed to be considered as a unit, which is why we're considering them as a unit. However, it wasn't immediately obvious to me what those first things had to do with each other, and particularly, what they had to do with gentleness as their opposite. I think of harshness as the opposite of gentleness, not greed.

After I thought about it for a while, though, I realized that running through all four of those things is the common idea of control. Gentleness, after all, is about a choice. When Marky is climbing on a fire engine during Truck Day at the park, I don't say to him, "Be gentle, Marky!" I know that no matter what he does, he's not going to damage the fire truck. However, if I were so unwise as to hand my son a newborn kitten, I would definitely tell him to be gentle, because it would be within his power to harm the kitten even if he didn't really mean to. We can only be gentle when we are restraining our strength.

However, those first three negative qualifications all have to do with a lack of self-restraint. A man given to wine can't control himself when it comes to alcohol. A violent man can't control his temper. A greedy man can't control his love of money. In all three cases, men with those spiritual problems don't own themselves anymore. Instead, their problems own them. As a result, they're not going to be gentle in any sense of the word because they haven't learned the self-discipline that gentleness requires.

The bottom line here is very simple. Men who want to become elders have to learn to control themselves. They need to learn to say no, even in the areas that they find most alluring and tempting, because if they can't bring themselves into line with God's will, the devil will be able to exploit their lack of self-discipline with disastrous consequences. They must remember a higher calling than doing what they want.

Similarly, the elder must not be **QUARRELSOME**. This isn't exactly the same thing as "violent". After all, even a man who keeps control of his temper can be contentious. We've all known Christians, I suspect, who enjoy disturbing the peace, who stake out some extreme position in Bible class not because they're really convicted of it, but because they want to see what the teacher will say. If I'm being honest, I will acknowledge that I am often tempted to be one of those people. I enjoy stirring things up!

However, over the years, I have slowly and painfully learned, and indeed am still learning, that what's fun isn't necessarily desirable. To extend my metaphor, once you start stirring things up, you're never quite sure what's going to come floating to the surface. Usually, the results are as unfortunate as they are unpredictable. An elder can't be a troublemaker like that, nor can he be so committed to his own personal think-so's that he insists on them in the face of opposition. Disagreement in the church is inevitable, but it always carries with it the potential for great danger. If we want to serve as leaders in the church, we must be conscious of its destructive power and know how to minimize, rather than to sharpen, differences of opinion.

Paul also warns that an elder cannot be **COVETOUS**. Kind of like "quarrelsome", this is the same as something we've already seen, but a little bit different. I tend to associate covetousness with greed, but they don't point to exactly the same concept. Greed is interested in money; covetousness is interested in stuff. Those have different implications. As the Scripture tells us, money is protection. It's potential. It keeps you safe from bad things and gives you the opportunity to get good things if you want to. Stuff, on the other hand, is . . . stuff. It's potential that has already been realized. It's something you already own that you bought because you thought it would make you happy. Of course, in reality, the satisfaction that we derive from stuff is fleeting. New cars don't stay new; dream homes don't stay dreamy. We get used to everything.

The covetous man, though, isn't wise enough to see the stuff trap. He thinks that this time, with this purchase, he'll finally get the piece of stuff that will make him content. He resents the people who have the stuff that he wants, even though if he pays attention, he will quickly see that their stuff hasn't made them any happier either. The devil loves people who are covetous, for he can use their covetousness to lead them anywhere he wants. Prospective elders must be able to see and avoid the covetousness trap.

Finally, if we wish to prepare to serve, we must **RULE OUR OWN HOUSES WELL**. Paul particularly links this household rulership to having submissive children. Here, we come to the reason why I chose to work through the 1 Timothy list rather than the Titus list. In Titus, Paul notes that an elder must have faithful children, and there is massive disagreement over whether this means that the children must be Christians in good standing or merely trustworthy, reliable people. I'm not going to get into that because it doesn't really have anything to do with the goals that a man must pursue in order to be qualified.

Instead, let's look at the text here. Paul points out that a man who cannot rule his own household cannot be trusted to take care of the church of God. A leader who fails at the family level should not be given the opportunity to fail at the church level. Here too, there is much discussion about what this means. People debate whether this refers to children who are still at home or to all of the man's children everywhere.

I think we can answer this question by referring to the actual work of the elder. Peter reveals in 1 Peter 5 that elders are to be examples, not lords. They don't lead by making people do anything. Instead, the elder, by his example and his moral authority, is able to guide and persuade the flock to follow Jesus.

If what we're talking about is example and moral authority rather than ability to coerce, we need to look at a man's children even when they aren't under his roof anymore. An authoritarian father can coerce and punish his children into unwilling obedience, but as soon as they're out on their own, they're going to reject everything he said. Instead, the true leader, the man who is qualified to be an elder, knows how to get his children to want to obey. That way, his influence will remain long after they've left home.

Make no mistake about it: it's hard to learn to be a leader rather than a driver. When someone isn't doing what we want, the direct approach often commends itself to us, and we clobber the problem until it subsides. However, that's a lousy way to motivate anybody. Instead, we must learn the gentler methods of patience, persuasion, and example. We must develop the moral authority that our children and ultimately our brethren will acknowledge and submit to. As we train ourselves to this, we become fit to serve as elders.