

Jesus: Our Exemplar in Prayer

*In these days he went out to the mountain to pray;
and all night he continued in prayer to God. ~ Luke 6:12*

THE APOSTLES SPENT a great amount of time in the presence of Jesus. They observed what he did, heard what he said, and ever so slowly became aware of what he valued, and why and how he thought and did things. Jesus was their leader; the apostles looked to him in all things. He was their Lord; he was their model. In time, they tried to imitate him. On many occasions, they witnessed Jesus praying (see Lk 3:21; Lk 4:1; Lk 9:28; Lk 10:21; Lk 11:1; Lk 22:32; Jn 17:1-26; Heb 5:7) and, wanting to be like him, they finally asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1). He gave us the essential prayer, the “Our Father” (see Mt 6:9-13; see also Lk 11:2-4). Their request of him clearly indicates that they accepted him as their exemplar in everything, prayer included.

The apostles had ample opportunities to observe the prayer life of their Master. They noted that he often withdrew from the crowds, oftentimes even from them, in order to pray (see Mt 14:23; Lk 5:16). They must have seen that Jesus was refreshed and ready for another teaching mission after having spent time in prayer. They also knew that Jesus prayed before important acts and decisions (see Mk 1:35-38; Mk 14:35; Lk 6:12) and before he worked miracles (see Jn 11:41-42). They saw that prayer was a constant background in Jesus’ life.

Jesus showed his followers that prayer can be drawn from the great treasury of Scriptural prayer, or can be simple prayers in our own words. He prayed the “Hallel” Psalms (songs of praise; the

word “Alleluia” derives from “Hallelu-ya” or “praise to God”) at the Last Supper (see Mt 26:30). Hanging on the cross, he used the Psalms to express his anguish of spirit — “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt 27:45, citing Ps 22:1) — and his trust in his Father — “into thy hands I commit my spirit” (Lk 23:46, citing Ps 31:5). He offered prayer in

simple language, using “Abba” (an affectionate term similar to “Daddy”) to address his Father (Mk 14:36) and to conform his human will to his Father’s will: “remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done” (Lk 22:42). He commended the humble man who prayed simply, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (Lk 18:13).

Jesus’ closest followers could not have failed to realize that his prayer and his whole life were centered on his Father. His communion with his Father at one point prompted them to ask him to “show us the Fa-

ther” (Jn 14:8). So many times, in the hearing of his apostles, Jesus prayed to and in praise of his Father (see Lk 10:21; Jn 11:41-42; Jn 12:27-28; Jn 17:4). Jesus’ love for his Father, his glory, his will, his every desire was the core of his life. Before he left his apostles for his final hours on Calvary, Jesus spoke emphatically of his Father: “I shall ... tell you plainly of the Father... for the Father himself loves you.... Father;... glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee.... And this is eternal life, that they know thee as the only true God.... I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do.... I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me.... Holy Father, keep them in thy name.... keep them from the evil one.... Sanctify them

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Jesus going up onto a mountain to pray, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

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in the truth ... that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee.... Father, I desire that they also ... may be with me where I am, to behold my glory.... O righteous Father, ... these know that thou has sent me ... that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 16:25, 27 and 17:1, 3-4, 6, 11, 15, 17, 21, 24-26).

This priestly prayer of Jesus could hardly have failed to make a tremendous impact upon the apostles and, no doubt, this was his intent, for he was about to leave them behind in a world in which they would be hated (see Jn 15:19). His prayer to the Father, in their presence, was intended also to instruct them: to emphasize for them that what was paramount in his life on earth should be the most important aspect of their own lives as his disciples. The lesson he wanted them, and us, to grasp was the central importance of his Father: that the Father was the Alpha and Omega (see Rv 21:6), the end-all and be-all of his life and, as our exemplar, of our lives as well. This Father-centeredness is unmistakably evident when Jesus’ followers asked him to teach them

to pray. It is Jesus’ Father, now our Father too, who is the heart of the matter of life as well as our heart’s desire at the moment of death.

During his life on earth, Jesus also emphasized the importance of faith in prayer. Again and again, the apostles heard that faith is the condition for answers to our prayers. Faith can move mountains, Jesus tells us, if that faith is even as small as a mustard seed (see Mt 17:20). But it must be actively present if we expect prayer to have results. *“All things are possible,”* says Jesus on one occasion, *“to him who believes”* (Mk 9:23). *“And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith”* (Mt 21:22), he says on another.

In reading the Gospels, we become aware of Jesus’ requirement of faith in those who requested favors of him, even miracles. He was pleased with those who had faith, and rewarded it: the Roman centurion (see Mt 8:8-10), the woman with the hemorrhage (see Mt 9:21-22), the pagan Canaanite woman who drew from Jesus the joyful exclamation, *“O woman, great is your faith!”* (Mt 15:28), the blind Bartimaeus (see Mk 10:51-52). He was dismayed by evidence of lack of faith. The Evangelist Mark tells us that *“he could do no mighty work there”* and *“he marveled because of their unbelief”* (Mk 6:5-6). And he rebuked the apostles when, fearing they would die, they awakened him while he slept in their boat through a storm on the Sea of Galilee: *“Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?”* (Mt 8:26).

In showing us the importance of prayer and its necessity in daily life, Jesus taught and practiced two essential things. First, prayer and our whole life are centered on God the Father and the accomplishment of his will. Second, the essential means of attaining an answer to our prayers is faith.

So when we pray, we must imitate Jesus. Like him, we must lift up our hearts and minds to God (see CCC 2559), hallow his name, submit ourselves and our requests to his will, and ask that his Kingdom may come on earth as it is in Heaven. Having touched first the heart of our Father, we can then ask, seek, and knock on that heart for our own needs and, with faith — as firm a faith as possible — await his response. To each of us, our Exemplar says: *“And I tell you, ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you”* (Lk 11:9).

(CCC 520, 612, 2559, 2598-2607, 2609-2611, 2746-2751, 2759-2761)



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