

Luke 5:16

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[0 : 00] Please turn now in God's Word to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 5. Gospel of Luke, chapter 5, page 1032, if you're using the Church Bible.

And we shall read verses 12 to 16. Luke 5, from verse 12. While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy.

When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.

I am willing, he said, be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him. Then Jesus ordered him, don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing as a testimony to them.

But the news about him spread all the more. So the crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

[1 : 34] In his sermon on the mount, the Lord Jesus has some very important things to say on the subject of private prayer.

And though we have just heard those words, I want to begin the sermon by quoting some of them again. Matthew 6, verses 5 and 6.

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men.

I tell you the truth, they have received the reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your father who is unseen.

Then your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. So private prayer was one of the things on which Jesus taught.

[2 : 49] And it was also something he practiced. And it is to that that Luke is drawing our attention here in chapter 5, verse 16.

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. A word or two about the background. In verse 14, Luke records some of the instructions that Jesus gave to a leper whom he had just wonderfully cleansed.

He was to go, show himself to the priest, and offer the sacrifices commanded by Moses for his cleansing. But these were not the only instructions that Jesus gave to this man.

The first thing that Jesus told him was to keep quiet about what had happened to him. Mark, verse 14.

Then Jesus ordered him, don't tell anyone. For reasons that are not disclosed, the Lord did not want this healing to be publicized.

[4 : 01] Mark, however, tells us that the man disobeyed. Instead, says Mark, he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. And it caused a sensation.

Luke tells us here in verse 15 that the news about him spread all the more. So that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.

Whilst, according to Mark, they came in such huge numbers that Jesus was no longer able to enter a town openly, but had to stay outside in the desert and people would come to him there.

It was a period of intense excitement and busyness in the Savior's life. He was at the very height of his popularity. And here is what Luke says in verse 16.

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. At every opportunity, he would steal away to some quiet place that he might be alone with his Father in heaven and pray to him.

[5 : 19] It was his habit. It was his habit. It was his custom. The tense of the verbs used here indicate that it was his habitual practice. He often withdrew from the scenes of tremendous busyness that he might seek the face of God in prayer.

Well, there are two things that emerge from our text, and they are going to be our headings this evening. In the first place, our Lord prayed alone.

He took time to be alone with his God. And secondly, an intensely busy life did not prevent him from praying alone.

And it is to these two things and the important matter of private prayer to which they introduce us that I want to direct your attention for our time together this evening.

Well, first of all, our Lord prayed alone. Private prayer was one of the activities of his life here on earth.

[6 : 30] And in the Gospels, we have a number of striking references to that practice. Mark 1, verse 35, for example, very early in the morning, and it was after an intensely busy day beforehand, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place where he prayed.

Again, in Matthew 14, verse 23, we learn that after the feeding of the 5,000, he went up into the hills by himself to pray.

Look, please, at the next chapter here in Luke's Gospel, chapter 6, verse 12. One of those days, Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray and spent the night praying to God.

When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them whom he also designated apostles. So it's Jesus' choice of those twelve apostles who were to figure so much in his ministry, and afterwards his choice of these men was preceded by a whole night spent in private prayer.

And then the reference in our text this evening, Luke 5, verse 16, but Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

[8 : 03] Now, he certainly prayed in the presence of his disciples, and we have some examples of that in the Gospels. But clearly, he both needed and loved to get away from people altogether and just be alone with his Father in heaven.

Well, in this respect, as in so many others, our Lord Jesus Christ has set an example for his people. It's good to pray with our families, and it is good for us to pray with our fellow Christians, but these times, brethren, are never to be a substitute for private prayer.

They were not in our Lord's case, and they are not to be in our own. We need to get alone with God. Private prayer is to be one of the activities of our own lives.

In the language of the Sermon on the Mount, which we have just heard, we are to go to our rooms, close the door, and pray to our Father, who is unseen.

And what I want to do for a moment or two now is to think with you about some encouragements to this practice of private prayer, some of the blessings of private prayer.

[9 : 30] First of all, private prayer allows us to privately confess our sins. Now, I have not said anything yet about the content or the subject of our Lord's private prayers, the kind of things that he talked about when he was alone with his Father in heaven.

But here is one thing that was very definitely not present in those prayers. confession of sin. Had you overheard him at prayer, and can you imagine what a blessed thing it must have been to have overheard the Son of God in prayer with his own Father in heaven?

Had you overheard him, you would never have heard him confessing sin to his Father, because of course he never had any sin to confess.

And we look at ourselves and we say without any hesitation whatsoever, how very different with us. With us there is always sin to confess, isn't there?

There are always things for which we need forgiveness. And one of the blessings of private prayer is that we can deal with this matter privately. You are not obliged by Holy Scripture to go to confession.

[11 : 04] confession. You don't need to tell your sins to any priest, nor as a general rule is it necessary for us to confess our sins to one another.

Now certainly there is a place for confessing our sins to one another. And you will find that James addresses that very matter in chapter 5 of his letter.

But it is neither wise nor necessary nor even possible to do that with all of our sin. Most of the time, mercifully, the confession of our sins is a matter between ourselves and God.

Think about it. We need to confess our sins. But it's only those who confess their sins that will be forgiven.

And in private prayer, we are mercifully given leave to confess those sins privately. And we can be completely open.

[12:15] We can talk to God about all those ugly things that are in our hearts and lives, things that we would not wish to speak to another soul about, all those things that weigh upon us, all those things of which we feel so ashamed, all those things for which we need the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ.

In private prayer, we can make a clean breast of them all. And it's just between ourselves and God. Very private matter. Isn't that a great blessing? Amen? Secondly, in private prayer, we are free to speak to God about everything that is on our hearts.

Now, those of you who are married know how it is. In marriage, you can talk to your husband or wife about things that you would not want to talk to anyone else about in all the world.

You can express your feelings, for example, your hopes and fears and longings and so on with an openness that would be quite inappropriate in conversation with others.

[13:37] Well, with our God and Savior, we can be even more free. We've been thinking about this in relation to the confession of sin, but it goes way beyond that.

We can talk to Him about everything that is upon our hearts. All those things that we couldn't talk to another soul about on the face of the earth, we can talk to Him and we can do so with great openness because He knows us through and through and He loves us unreservedly and has given us this open invitation to come with boldness to His throne of grace.

And I would suggest to you that here perhaps we have a clue to at least part of the contents of our Lord's private prayers for you remember how dull His disciples were, how slow they were to understand, how especially unable to sympathize with Him in the necessity of His sufferings, that which so weighed upon His own spirit.

He could always be open for His Father in Heaven because when He poured His heart out to Him, He did so to one who perfectly understood.

And that is one of the choice blessings of private prayer for His people. We can approach a God who both fully knows us and marvelously loves us and with whom therefore we can be entirely open.

[15:18] You can talk to Him about everything. You can pour out your heart before Him with no inhibition whatsoever, all your fears, all your longings, all your needs, all the things that make you angry, all the things that make you sad, all the things that no one else understands, all those things about which you cannot speak to another soul.

to Him in private prayer, you can take them all. Isn't that a great blessing? Thirdly, in private prayer, we are free to pray at length.

And what I mean by that is this, when we are engaging in public prayer or when we are praying in the presence of other people, we always ought to be conscious of those other people.

And it's inappropriate to pray on and on and on and on as if they weren't there. At a prayer meeting, for example, if it's a time of open prayer, others ought to be given time and opportunity to pray as well.

It is also the case, and we who are ministers as well as anyone else ought to bear this in mind, that we can weary others with our prayers if they are too long.

[16:49] The 18th century evangelist George Whitefield spoke somewhere or other about a man who prayed him into a good spiritual frame and then prayed him out of it again because he just went on and on and on and on.

But all of that changes things when we get alone with God. When we are alone with God, we are free to pray at any length. Now, it's not always possible to pray at length.

Those of you who are mothers of young children, you know that, for example. And nor is it the case that the Bible insists that we pray at length.

Nevertheless, in private prayer, we are free to pray at length. And so, if you have half an hour or an hour and you want to spend that time in communion with God, you are free to use the whole time.

And if our hearts are sincere, God does not weary of us. Indeed, he's only too pleased to listen. And there are none of the pressures and constraints that the presence of others impose when we are praying in public.

[18:10] And if our hearts are stirred, and if we have the strength and the time, we can pray on and on and on.

And there is our Lord in Luke's Gospel, chapter 6, and he's praying a whole night to God in prayer. And perhaps he did it more than once. And then to take one last example, we are free to engage in private prayer at any time.

Whenever we wish, whenever we are free, we may come to God in prayer. There are no set times. It is not as if God is available only at certain hours of the day, and the rest of the time he's busy doing other things.

We don't have to make an appointment with him. You remember how the prophet Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal as they called from morning to night upon their God, Baal, and how he derided this God.

[19 : 23] Well, perhaps he's deep in thought, or he's busy, or he's traveling, or he's sleeping. He certainly wasn't paying them any attention whatsoever. And here are we, and it's our privilege to know the living and true God.

And his mind is so stupendous that he is able to listen simultaneously to all of the prayers of all of his people in any part of the world, and continue on at the same time to do all the other things that are in his hands as the governor of the universe.

Have you ever tried to listen to two people talking at the one time, two different conversations, to give you whole attention to each? It's impossible. You flip back and forth between the two.

God's mind is so great that he can listen to all of the prayers of his people and his heart is so large and his love is so great that he is pleased to welcome us at any time whenever you wish.

You are free to come and speak with him. Wasn't it a freedom that our Lord enjoyed as the beloved son?

[20 : 48] He could come to his father at any time. And though in and of ourselves we are so beneath him, by grace we have been elevated to the same platform of privilege and we too at any time may have the ear of the living God.

Well, these are some of the encouragements then to follow our Savior's example, some of the blessings of private prayer. It allows us to confess our sins privately.

We are free to speak to our God about everything. We are free to pray at any length and we are free to pray at any time.

Isn't it a great privilege then, this privilege of private prayer? prayer? Brethren in Christ, let us make large use of it.

It's one of the great keys to Christian growth and Christian usefulness, following the Lord's example in private prayer.

[22 : 05] But now secondly, having noted this simple basic fact that our Lord prayed alone, we notice that an intensely busy life did not prevent our Lord from praying alone.

And it's this that brings us to the heart of our text. Verses 15 and 16, the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. It was, as we noted earlier, a period of intense excitement and activity.

In Jesus' life, he's at the height of his popularity. There is many a faithful preacher today who struggles to get even a few to listen.

And here is our Lord, and crowds are flocking to listen to him. And you remember, too, that our Lord knew that his time was short.

[23 : 14] How memorably he put it, the night cometh when no man can work. It was right for him to be busy in his father's work, and he gave himself to it with all his heart.

He relished these opportunities to minister to the people. That's what he had been sent to do. And yet, he often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

He did not make the busyness of life an excuse for not praying alone. It seems rather that the more full his life was, the more busy he was, and the more intense the pressures that were upon him, the more frequently he was alone with his God.

Certainly, the busyness of life did not prevent him from praying alone. In his humanity, our Savior was dependent upon his Father in heaven for all the things that he needed for the fulfillment of his ministry on earth, for wisdom, for guidance, for strength, for power.

For those things, in his human nature, he needed to pray just as we do. And of course, there was more to it than that, wasn't there?

[24 : 45] There was just the sheer fact that he loved God. God was his Father in heaven, and there were times when he just needed to be alone with him, to be quiet, and to refresh his spirit in communion with his Father.

So, an intensely busy life did not prevent our Savior from praying alone. God's son. And if we are to be like him, and I really want to lift it up to that level, if we are to be like him, and do you remember that if we are believers, we have been predestined to be conformed to the likeness of God's son. If we are to be like him, then the busyness of life must not prevent us from engaging in private prayer either.

But it's often the temptation that we face, isn't it? And it's one that it is very easy for us to yield to, so many things to do.

Life so full, so hectic, going here, going there, going everywhere. This activity, that activity, this responsibility, that responsibility, our schedule so crowded, every day, every evening, every weekend, something on our calendar.

[26 : 30] How easy it is, isn't it? How easy it is to become neglectful of private prayer. How easy to excuse ourselves because we are so busy.

And how foolish it is. I ask you, are we any the less dependent upon God in busy times? Don't we need him at all times? aren't there sins that we need to confess, burdens for which we need strength, decisions for which we need his guidance, temptations that we need to resist in busy times?

Doesn't the neglect of private prayer make us spiritually weak and vulnerable? What have you said to yourself that you were just too busy to eat?

Well, you know that within a few hours you would feel very weak indeed, we need to eat, in order to stay strong physically. And if we are to be spiritually strong in face of all the sin and temptation that we face, and if we are to resist the molding influences of the world upon our thinking and behavior, we need to get regularly alone with God.

[28 : 02] If the pressures and demands upon us are not to leave us hard and cold, we need to maintain communion with God.

So, let me put the question to you very pointedly this evening. How is it with you in regard to private prayer? How has it been with you this past month or this past week?

You think of all the things for which you have found time over the past week, over the past month, the hours spent working, the hours spent sleeping, the hours spent eating, chatting with other people, the hours spent surfing the nets, the hours spent on Facebook, the hours spent playing sport, watching sport, all these things with which our lives can be so full?

Have you found time for God, for being alone with God, in the midst of all that busyness? Or is it the case that all of these things have been allowed to squeeze private prayer out?

Brethren, if our lives are so crowded that we have no time to pray alone, then we are too busy, and we urgently need to alter our priorities.

[29 : 44] if Jesus needed to be alone with prayer, how much more do we who are sinners? And the fact that he so evidently wanted to be alone with his Father in heaven, what a challenge that is to where we are in our hearts, and whether we really do delight in the presence of God.

Well, let me give you a couple of practical directives, and then conclude with some application to some classes of hearers here this evening.

A couple of practical directives. If at busy times you're not able to spend a long time in prayer, do at least endeavor to spend some time.

It may only be a few minutes, but you know it will make all the difference if for those few moments your hearts and minds are fully engaged in communion with God.

I ask you, can we not all make a few moments for prayer, even on the busiest of days? Find them and use them, that you may not back slide.

[31 : 10] Most people find it useful to have a fixed time each day, when they can almost guarantee that they will be alone. But however we do it, because we can't legislate on that, however we do it, the busyness of life must not be permitted to crowd out private prayer.

We will suffer as believers if it does. And then secondly, let it be your endeavor to pray amidst the activities of a busy day.

You remember Nehemiah? Here he is and he's being asked a question in the presence of the king and he prays to the God of heaven and answers the king.

What did he have time to ask for? Probably no more than, Lord help me, and bless this request when the Lord heard his prayer.

And we can do that kind of thing a thousand times a day. Grant me your help. Forgive me. Have mercy upon me.

[32 : 20] Have mercy upon so and so. Give me understanding. Give me wisdom. Grant your blessing upon this evening's meeting.

Thank you for your goodness. Remember so and so. In a way that is perfectly compatible with the full discharge of all our responsibilities to others as you at work give your full attention to the task in hand.

God's we can we can still maintain private communion with God even amidst the activities of the busiest of days. Now, it ought not to be a substitute for a deliberate drawing near to God as our Savior did.

He too doubtless often prayed as Nehemiah did, but he still felt the need and he still felt the desire and he still took the time to pray alone.

but as a help to us in the midst of our busyness. Remember that you can pray in the quietness of your heart at any time.

[33 : 43] Well, let me conclude with some words to four classes of hearers. First of all, a word to fathers.

And it's appropriate on this family day. If you have read, and perhaps many of you have read, the wonderful autobiography of the missionary to the New Hebrides, John G.

Payton, you may recall the moving description that he gives in the opening chapter of his father. prayer. He was a man of prayer.

And John Payton describes how several times a day, generally after a meal, his father would retire to a little room in the cottage that they occupied, and there he would pray.

And sometimes John would overhear him, and he tells us what a deep, lifelong impression, for good, it made upon him his father as a man of prayer.

[34 : 55] I'm going to be speaking in a moment to the leaders of the church, but office bearers are not the only God ordained leaders.

Those of us who are husbands and fathers, we too are leaders, leaders within our home, leaders by the ordinance of God. Rather, let it be something in which we take our lead, a matter in regard to which we set an example for those whom God has given to our care, our wives and children.

Yes, we are all busy men. I'm a busy man. You're a busy man. But what a blessing to a family.

And what a wonderful example to children. And what a lifelong impression for good that might have upon them if they see in us a determination to be like the Savior and not to let the pressures of life and the busyness of life keep us from private prayer.

Secondly, a word to those of you who, like me, are office bearers within the church. Brethren, you know that in addition to work-related duties and our home duties, we all have important and demanding church duties, all that is involved in being an elder or a deacon.

[36 : 40] children, and we need to be spiritual men. If we're going to fulfill these responsibilities to the glory of God and to the good of this church of Christ, and we will only be spiritual men if we maintain communion with God.

God, never neglect your personal study of the Word of God, and never neglect private prayer.

Wisdom, grace, gentleness, forbearance, the strength to do what is right, self-control of the tongue, understanding of the Scriptures, strong faith, warm love, all these things come to us through communion with God.

Let it be our resolve if we are office bearers, by the grace of God, that even when things are at their busiest, for the sake of the church, we will not neglect private prayer, but be like our Savior, who often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

He is our leader in this regard. And then a word or two to the young adults here this evening, students especially, but by no means exclusively.

[38 : 20] Let me encourage you to establish a pattern for life in this regard, if you have not already done so. Your lives are full as well.

We do not live in a leisurely society. We don't live our lives at a leisurely pace. Things are full, things are hectic.

And you know the challenges and the temptations that you face, intellectual challenges to your faith perhaps, moral challenges in the whole realm of sexual temptation, more insidious temptations, thus the temptation to have one foot in the world and one foot in the church, the temptation to settle for less than what is God's best, to settle down into a half-hearted Christianity, where God has some place, but not the whole place.

You know the kind of temptations to which I refer. And though private prayer is by no means the whole spiritual antidote, there is a great one.

There is a powerful one. And I urge you, I often think, about the fact that we have but one life, and young people can ruin their lives.

[39 : 57] And here are you, many of you young people already saved by grace, and what opportunity should God spare you to give your life to Christ wholly and unreservedly?

Let private prayer have its rightful place, and don't let the busyness of life, student life, working life, leisure time, crowd it out.

Make it your pattern for life, that you might be strong in the Lord, and that you might serve your generation with godliness and grace, and do something for a Savior who has done so much for you. And then, finally, to those of you who are not yet saved, I don't know, this congregation, I don't know, who's sitting here in front of me for the most part.

It may well be that there are some of you here this evening who are not yet saved. Do you know that God's word instructs you to pray? Seek the Lord, whilst they may be found, call upon him.

[41 : 14] While he is near, it is those who call upon the name of the Lord who will be saved. The tax collector went home justified having cried out, God, be merciful to me, a sinner, the dying thief.

Lord, remember me. the Savior answers prayer and Satan would keep you from prayer.

And he would do his utmost to let the busyness of your life keep you from earnest seeking of God. There is nothing more important than your salvation.

Nothing more important than your salvation. And that is not empty rhetoric, that is not exaggeration, it is the truth. There is nothing more important than that you be saved.

And if you are not yet saved, don't let the busyness of life keep you from seeking the Lord. You seek him with all your heart prayers and plead his promises.

[42 : 34] And if you do so, the Lord will hear your prayer and he will save you. Let us pray. Pray.

Don't