

The Commands of Christ

Command # 33

“WATCH AND PRAY.”

Matthew 26:36-44 (v. 41)

The Lord has just warned his disciples that they will abandon him, and when Peter says that no matter what the others do, “he” will never abandon him. Jesus replies that before the cock crows you will three times. Peter says no that will never be the case and the Bible says, “so said they all” (Matt 26:35).

The Lord and his disciples make their way to a place called Gethsemane (meaning oil press) it was the name of a garden on the eastern bank of the brook Kidron, it was probably located at the foot of the Mount of Olives about ¾ of a mile from eastern wall of Jerusalem. According to Luke 22:39 it was Jesus’ custom to go there to pray.

“Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, “Sit here while I go and pray over there.” (37) And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. (38) Then He said to them, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me.” (39) He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” (40) Then He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “What! Could you not watch with Me one hour? (41) Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (42) Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done.” (43) And He came and found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy. (44) So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.”

As Jesus entered the garden it was at the end of a long and difficult week. (Probably everyone here can identify with that description.) Jesus was under the weight of His responsibility for the salvation of the world, so when they arrived at the garden Jesus separated himself from larger group of disciples, to go to a place alone to seek strength in prayer. Jesus then indicated that he would go forward to a place that he indicated “over there” (v. 36) possibly pointing to it, he left them with a command. “Sit here while I pray there.”

He now took three of his disciples (Peter, James and John) with Him as he on two previous occasions (Matt 17:1, Mark 5:37). These three were to be witnesses of the agony of Jesus, just as they previously had been witnesses of His glory (Matt 17:1). Jesus did not take these disciples along in order that he might have their companion-ship, or their comfort. He took them along for their benefit, not His.

Jesus' Great Distress (vv. 37-38a)

In verse thirty-seven he says, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death..." It is hard to over emphasize how deeply distressed Jesus was at this point. He says that he is "sorrowful" a word indicating inner pain of heart, mind and spirit. But not just sorrowful, but "exceedingly sorrowful" - a word meaning great mental stress. So great was the stress Jesus says, He is "sorrowful, even unto death" which means to be so filled with sorrow that one would rather be dead.

What was that caused the distress of Jesus? First, the personal disappointments associated with His disciples, no doubt distressed Jesus. Think for a moment of what that entailed. The treacherous Judas, was at that very moment selling him out to His enemies. In the ensuing terror of his arrest, the remaining eleven disciples would desert Him. Peter, had exclaimed his undying devotion would deny him just as Jesus had predicted.

In addition to the rejections of his friends, were the blatant injustices He would face during His trials. He would be cursed, and reviled and beaten, by the most wicked and cruel of men.

Jesus knew that ahead of him was a loneliness that no man had ever experience. The Son of God who lived in constant communion with the Father would find himself forsake by the Father as he borne the sins of all mankind. As He took on the vilest sins of all mankind, the Father, indeed all of heaven, would be so repulsed that they would turn their heads from Him. And the sin that so repulsed Heaven was just as repulsive to Jesus himself. Think what turmoil He had to endure as the sinless, holy Son of God, to allow the vilest and most horrible of sins to be laid on his shoulders, that he might bear your sins and mine.

Although Satan's activities are not specifically mentioned here, I believe that he was present to whisper to Jesus his own spin on the events. If you saw Mel Gibson's *"The Passion of the Christ"* you will remember that he depicts Satan as present in the Garden of Gethsemane doing his very best to prevent Jesus from going to the cross.

Human understanding can not fully comprehend the agony that Jesus endured that night in Gethsemane. He felt the entire weight of the sins of the whole world, and it was almost more than His human body could bear.

Stay and Watch (v. 38b)

The first command I want us to notice in this verses are found in instructions to his disciples, "... Stay here" (*meinate* – remain) and "watch" (*gregoreite* – imperative) with Me." There is a two-fold command in this verse, first he says it is your job to "stay here" just as he had told the other disciples (v. 36) he told these three disciples that they must now remain behind. But in addition he told these disciples that it would be their responsibility to "watch" with Him. He wanted them to "watch" or pay attention because he wanted to teach them some

important things. What was he asking them to do? Watching means to be spiritually alert. It is an inner aware-ness of reality as it truly is--the knowledge of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, and the knowledge of the conflict that exists between these two kingdoms. It means to be aware of, not ignorant of, the devices of Satan.

He wanted them to learn that as important as human companionship is there are times when our only help comes from communion with the Father in prayer.

In acknowledging his weakness and human need, he was doing the very thing that His disciples had been unwilling to do.

Watch and Pray (vv.40-41)

After having gone away and prayed for a while Jesus returned and found his disciples asleep. They had watched for a while but then the urge for sleep had overwhelmed them. As John MacArthur notes in his commentary, "While Jesus understanding the danger retreated to prayer his disciples retreated to sleep.They were sleeping at the moment of the greatest spiritual conflict in the history of the world." But he as notes, "... in fairness, it should be noted that sleep is often a means of escape, and the disciples may have slept more out of frustration, confusion and depression than apathy." [John MacArthur. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Matthew 24-28) (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989) p. 175]

This time he specifically addressed Peter when he asked, "Could you not watch with me for one hour?" (v.40). Jesus understood their human weakness but must pray or they will surely fall. This time as he leave he tells them; "Watch (*gregoreite* – imperative) and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"(v.41). In the original language this instruction is written as a present active imperative, meaning literally, "*Keep on watching and keep on praying.*"

Jesus had told the disciples to watch and pray, but they did not heed his counsel. Thus, when trouble came, they were unprepared. What did they do? Peter, thinking that he could save Jesus by force, woke up from his sleep, took a sword and cut off the ear of a servant. Later he denied Christ three times. Later that day, all the disciples scattered when Jesus was crucified. Why did they do these things? They had failed to heed Jesus' repeated command: "*Watch and pray, lest you come into temptation.*"

He had given them a simple assignment - to watch and pray with him, lest they come into temptation. These were men who were extremely confident of their loyalty to Christ. Earlier that evening, when Jesus had said the shepherd would be smitten and the sheep of the flock scattered, Peter protested vehemently, telling Jesus that even if everyone else fled, he would go with Jesus to prison and death. James and John assured Jesus of their loyalty earlier also. In Mark 10 we read that when they asked Jesus to give them the places of honor at his right and left, Jesus asked if they could drink the cup he would drink and be baptized with the

baptism he would be baptized with. What did they say? Without thinking and understanding, they assured him that they could.

R. Kent Hughes speaks to the value of prayer when he says, “Jesus, who steeled himself in prayer while asking that the hour might pass from him,’ accepted it, saying, ‘The hour has come,’ and went out to drink the cup and win the greatest victory ever won. The disciples all failed, and significantly Peter, who fell asleep three times, went on to deny his Lord by the same number – hardly a poetic coincidence! But all was not lost. Their scandal was to become their salvation because in the years to come all came to steel their lives in prayer.” [R. Kent Hughes. *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*. (Vol. II) (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1989) p. 169]

Most of us understand that prayer is easier to talk about than it is to practice.

J. Sidlow Baxter had some highly instructive things to say about his own struggle to pray. He found that there was a part of him that wanted to pray (his will) and there was a part of him that did not want to pray (his emotions). He sums up his battle this way, “As never before, my will and I stood face to face. I asked my will the straight question, ‘Will are you ready for an hour of prayer?’ Will answered, ‘Here I am, I’m ready, if you are.’ So Will and I linked arms, and turned to go for our time of prayer. At once all the emotions began pulling the other way and protesting, ‘We’re not coming.’ I saw Will stagger just a bit, so I asked, ‘Can you stick it out, Will?’ and Will replied, ‘Yes, if you can.’ So Will went, and we got down in prayer, dragging those wriggling, bad tempered (obstreperous) emotions with us. It was a struggle all the way through. At one point, when Will and I were in the middle of an earnest intercession, I suddenly found one of those traitorous emotions had snared my imagination and had run off to the golf course; and it was all that I could do to drag the wicked rascal back. A bit later I found another of the emotions has sneaked away with some off-guard thoughts and was in the pulpit, two days ahead of schedule, preaching a sermon that I had not yet finished preparing!

At the end of that hour, if you had asked me, ‘Have you had a good time?’ I would have had to reply, ‘No, it has been a wearying wrestle with contrary emotions and a truant imagination from beginning to end.’ What is more, that battle with the emotions continued for between two and three weeks, and if you had asked me at the end of that period, ‘Have you had a good time in your daily praying?’ I would have had to confess, ‘No, at times it has seemed as though the heavens were brass, and God too distant to hear, and the Lord Jesus strangely aloof, and prayer accomplishing nothing.’

Yet something was happening. For one thing, Will and I really taught the emotions that we were completely independent of them. Also, one morning, about two weeks after the contest began, just when Will and I were going for another time of prayer, I overheard one of the emotions whisper to the other, ‘Come on guys, it’s no use wasting your time resisting: they’ll go jus the same.’ That morning, for the first time, even though the emotions were still sullenly uncooper-ative, they were at least quiet (quiescent), which allowed Will and me to get on with prayer undistractedly.

Then, another couple of weeks later, what do you think happened? During one of our prayer times, when Will and I were no more thinking of the emotions than of the man in the moon, one of the most vigorous of the emotions exclaimed 'Amen!' And for the first time the whole of my being, intellect, will and emotions – was united in one coordinated prayer-operation. All at once, God was real, heaven was open, the Lord Jesus was luminously present, the Holy Spirit was indeed moving through my longings, and prayer was surprisingly vital. Moreover, in that instant there came a sudden realization that heaven had been watching and listening all the way through those days of struggle against chilling moods and mutinous emotions; also that I had been undergoing necessary tutoring by my heavenly teacher." [As quoted by R. Kent Hughes. Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior. (Vol. II) (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1989) pp. 171-172]