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Sermon Series: *Native Prayer, No. 3*

It's Critical

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Matthew 26:36-44 (NIV, ©1984)

Then Jesus went with His disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then He said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then He returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" He asked Peter. "Watch and pray, so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When he came back, He again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So He left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Would you take a Bible and turn to Matthew, Chapter 26, this morning? Matthew 26, our text there is verses 36-44.

I've said before that one of the most important lessons I learned about parenting came about 3 years before Annette and I had children of our own. We were at our first appointment in Pennsylvania, and we were hosting a missionary family for special services.

It was a nice day, and we were all out in the backyard of our house while their children were playing in the yard.

Now our house, the parsonage, was attached to the church building, and the whole thing was just off Route 51, a busy, four-lane highway that connects Pittsburgh and Uniontown.

And when I say our house was *just off the road*, I mean there were maybe 50 feet, just a short gravel strip, between our front door and 51's northbound lanes.

As we sat in the backyard there, one of their kids, their little three-year-old girl, started to walk around the side of the house toward the front. The dad, who had clearly told them they were not to leave the backyard, called her name and said, "No, come here."

The girl just looked at him.

The dad called her name again and said, "Come here now."

At that, the little girl grinned at her dad, then turned and kept right on walking toward the front.

The dad very calmly got up, caught her, took her in the house, and from the crying we heard through the open windows, disciplined her soundly.

Now, honestly, I remember being surprised by that.

Not to say I was a stranger to discipline. My parents fully embraced the truth of Proverbs 13:26, which we casually translate, "Spare the rod, spoil the child."

And I deserved every rod I got.

But this little girl? She looked so cute with her grin and everything. So, my thinking then was that the punishment seemed rather severe for the crime.

After the kids were in bed that night, I asked the dad about what happened, and this is what he told me. He said:

"Daryl, as a parent, one of the first things a child needs to learn, right along with the fact that you love them, is to obey you without question. The child may not understand why you ask what you do of them, and that doesn't matter. What matters is that they do it immediately.

"I want my children to particularly understand that when I say, 'Stop, turn around, and come to me,' I mean right now and I mean it for their own good. Here, the danger they faced, but didn't understand, was the highway. On the mission field, it could be a snake, a poisonous bug, a sinkhole, a cliff, or any number of things that they might not see, or might not see as dangerous.

"It simply can't be left up to the child to choose when and when not they'll obey. Where we live, in order for them to survive, I must teach them, and they must learn, quick and complete obedience."

Quick and complete obedience.

The goal of any serious disciple of Jesus must be to do the will of God, the Father, quickly and completely.

If you are a follower of Jesus and that is not your goal, then may I say, you're not really a follower of Jesus. Because if Jesus had one goal—if there is just one thing that characterizes Jesus—it is that He did the will of God His Father.

In verse 39 there, Jesus admits, "*Not as I will, but as you will.*"

Quick and complete obedience to God.

I realize this sounds simplistic, but the fact is, the one and only reason there is so much trouble in the world today is because people don't do the will of God.

Our Heavenly Father knows what's best for us.

- He has communicated His will to His world in how nature works and how it doesn't.
- He has communicated His will through Scripture.
- And He communicates His will to us personally, through the voice and the conviction of His Spirit.

And God's purpose in all this communication — all of this trying to guide us — is *not* to make us *miserable* or to assert His authority over us for the sake of His own ego, as some *earthly* fathers unfortunately do.

Our *Heavenly* Father tries to guide us because He loves us and wants the best for us — to keep us off the highway.

He wants to preserve our lives.

As John Oswalt said a few weeks ago and as Patti Fiskeaux reminded us at Prayer Meeting last Wednesday, God is **for** us.

God loves us and He is for us — for our good. He wants us to live lives that are free from all the junk and sin in this world.

And yet, in much of the world today — in countries, in families, in churches — many, many people are frustrated and fractured and fighting with each other because they will not listen to God. There is this seed of resistance to Him in our spirit that goes clear back to the Garden of Eden.

It was there that God made people, and He made us in His own image, and part of that image means that we have a free will that allows us to choose what we will and will not do.

Adam and Eve had that free will. They were God's good creation, made in His own image, and God told them one thing, as far as we can tell. God gave them just *one* negative command: "*Don't eat this.*"

And then Satan came along and tempted them, and what did they do?

They ate this. They chose *not to listen* to God. And ever since, humanity has struggled with listening to Him.

Ever since, human nature is bent toward pleasing *ourselves* and doing what *we* want to do.

That is the core problem of our world.

In fact, we know we're bent toward pleasing ourselves because even the word *obedience*, if we're honest, is offensive to us.

We don't like it — unless we're talking about someone else.

We like it when our children are obedient, which frankly should give us some insight into the mind of God and what our disobedience does to Him.

We like it when other people do what we say.

But when we're talking about doing what other people say — what God says — well, that can be something else.

Quick and complete obedience.

Jesus was completely human *and* completely divine.

That's the doctrine, which most of us would say we believe.

But honestly, that's a hard thing for us to get our heads around, isn't it? And so, most of us, out of reverence for Jesus, give Him more of a divine slant.

We tend to think of Him as more divine than human. And because of that, we struggle with this passage here in Matthew.

It's hard to think that Jesus would need to pray.

It's hard to imagine Jesus struggling to the point of tears and death.

It's hard to think Jesus could want something that He does not choose.

Verse 36 says Jesus was overwhelmed. How could Jesus feel overwhelmed? How can all this be?

It's because Jesus was not only completely divine, He was also completely human.

I think this is one of the most insightful, revealing passages in Scripture regarding Jesus' humanity. It's comforting, to me, to know that Jesus was *this* human:

- because that means Jesus can relate to our human suffering;
- because it is Jesus' humanity that allowed His death to atone for our sins. Only one of us could die for us, you see?

But Jesus' humanity also means that it is possible for a fully human person, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to live in harmony with God.

Jesus' humanity means that people can be sanctified — made holy — like Jesus.

Jesus' humanity means that a human person can have a perfect heart — a perfect intent to please God.

We can become quickly and completely obedient.

Of course, we are all sinners saved by grace.

But once we're saved, we are not bound to be sinners for the rest of our lives.

Paul says in Romans 6, once we're redeemed, "*do we just go on sinning so grace can increase? By no means!*"¹

Jesus' humanity proves that we can learn *obedience* to God — *because Jesus learned obedience*.

Hebrews five says, "*Jesus learned obedience through what He suffered...*"²

Now, here's another hard thing to get our heads around. What does it mean that Jesus *learned obedience*? How could Jesus *learn obedience*?

We have a problem with this because we tend to think that obedience, particularly in a spiritual sense, is a static thing. We tend to think that once you're obedient, you're never anything but obedient.

But that's not true, is it? For a person with a free will, we may be obedient one day — we may be obedient for a week. But a week of obedience doesn't guarantee that we'll not be *disobedient* on the next day.

Obedience is dynamic.

Obedience was dynamic, even with Jesus.

Now, Jesus started out obedient. He was born as the "second Adam." He started life differently than you and I did. He began unstained.

But with every temptation He faced, Jesus chose to be obedient to His Heavenly Father. His was a life of perfect obedience to the will of God, in every decision, and it came to a head here in the Garden of Gethsemane. The climax of Jesus' obedience was right here.

¹ Romans 6:1-2

² Hebrews 5:8-9

You see, back in the Garden of *Eden*, Adam faced the choice, “Will he trust God or not?” And Adam chose *not* to trust God.

Here, in the Garden of Gethsemane, the second Adam, Jesus, faces the same choice, “Will He trust God or not? Will He trust His Father, who is telling Him that His death is the only way to save humanity?”

It seems to me that, for thirty-three years, every temptation, every opportunity, every distraction in Jesus’ life built upon the other and prepared Him for this moment in Gethsemane.

I can imagine every demon of hell and every angel of heaven watching Jesus agonize and pray, and wondering, “Will He trust His Father even this much? Sure, Jesus has been perfect so far, but has He learned obedience to death, even death on a cross?”

Philippians 2:8 says, “*Yes. Jesus became obedient to death, even death on a cross.*” Jesus chose obedience: He chose to trust His Father, and so a life of perfect obedience was sacrificed to save the disobedient – to save you and me.

So—how did Jesus *learn obedience*? How was His obedience sustained, even to this level?

According to Jesus here, it had everything to do with prayer.

Jesus says to Peter here in verse 41, “*Watch and pray, so you don’t fall to temptation.*”

You see, Peter slept. And He fell to temptation. Not long after this, he denied he even knew Jesus.

But Jesus prayed, and He went to the cross.

Prayer kept Jesus in harmony with His Heavenly Father, and not just here. The gospels talk all the time about Jesus going off and praying.

In this instance, Jesus goes off to pray three times.

Three times He sits down with His Father to receive strength, to make sure He heard Him right, to even ask if there wasn’t some other way.

Hebrews says that, “*Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save Him from death.*”¹

You see, human beings learn obedience through prayer.

How? There’s no big mystical, spiritual secret to it.

What is prayer? *Prayer* is communion—communion and *communication* with God. Communication builds *relationship*, right? And *relationship*, as it grows, builds *trust*. And trust builds *faith*. And faith works itself out in obedience.

And so, when the child is edging toward a cliff that she doesn’t see, and the parent says to the child, “Stop. Turn around. Come to me,” the child comes.

She doesn’t have to understand the circumstance. All she knows is, “I know my daddy. I trust my daddy. I know my daddy loves me, so if He wants me to do this, then it’s for my good,” and so she comes without delay. She comes without question. She

comes in faith because she trusts—because she knows, intimately, her mom or dad.

When you have faith in someone, you do what they ask you to do.

And that’s the life of faith. That’s why Jesus said, “*If you believe in me, you’ll do the things I tell you to do.*”

“You’ll *obey* me because you *trust* me—and you’ll *trust* me when you *know* me.”

And we know Him through prayer.

You see, we can know *about* Him *without* prayer.

But we’ll never *know* Him, trust Him or quickly and completely obey Him without prayer.

Do you know Him? Really?

Do you trust Him? Is your trust worked out in obedience?

You know, there are so many people in our world whose lives are just so broken, and they’re looking for help and answers. If you doubt that, just think about all the resources that are out there to help people get their lives and finances and families and relationships in order. People are paying big bucks and investing tons of time to buy something that they think might bring order to their personal chaos.

And all the while, God is quietly saying, “*Would you just come to me? Would you listen to me—to my word?*”

It’s clear you’re seeking and you’re willing to invest. Why won’t you invest in me?

If you’d just set some time aside every day to sit with me, and get to know me, you’d learn to trust me.

And if you’ll trust me, you’ll find what I have to say will really help you; in fact, it’ll transform you. I’ll make you into the person—I’ll give you the life—that we both want for you.

Would you do that?”

That’s what God wants to know. Would you be like Jesus and learn obedience through prayer?

That’s the way to a joyful life—a fulfilled life, the life you were made to live: we have to trust Him enough to do what He says.

Consider:

- the reason Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac,
- the reason Moses was able to set stand up to Pharaoh,
- the reason Jesus was able to give Himself to the cross,
- the reason most of the Apostles were willing to die for their faith,
- the reason anyone has ever been able to do anything great for God

is because they trusted Him. They trusted Him because they knew Him, and they knew Him because prayer—communication with Him—was a critical element in their lives.

¹ Hebrews 5:7

Would you commit today to making prayer – talking with God, listening to God – a critical element in your life?

What does that look like? We're all in different places, so that's different for different people, but I believe if you said, "God, I want to know You better; I want to pray more," He would tell you what that looks like for you.

If you don't really, consistently pray, maybe begin praying for fifteen minutes a day? Or maybe God is asking for more time from you – 30 or 45 minutes or more?

Maybe He would like you to talk with Him about others and not just about yourself.

Maybe He is asking you to spend more time listening to Him and less time talking to Him.

I don't know. What is God asking of you?

Would you do it:

For the sake of knowing God better?

So as to trust Him more?

So to be more willingly and quickly obedient to what He says?

That's how we become what He made us to be.

Prayer: Lord, Your Spirit is here in our midst. You go where You are wanted, and where someone is listening for You, You will speak. And so, I pray that You would speak to all of us here about what that looks like in our lives: to make prayer truly critical, so that we might know You, trust You, have faith in You, and so that we might completely and willingly be obedient to You. Speak to us, Holy Spirit, we pray even as we come around Your table. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *I Am Trusting Thee, Lord Jesus*

Benediction:

May we all be people, individually and together be a people, who obey quickly and completely – truly trusting Jesus forever and for all.