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Jesus, Prayer, and a Deeper Sense of Mission: A Reflection on Mark 1:35-39

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Today we will talk about a time when Jesus went off and prayed by himself, in the early morning hours and emerged with a very clear and powerful sense of mission. There might be a lesson here for us.

(VOA/music)

Welcome to the Faith and Enterprise podcast. My name is Rob Tribken; I will be your host.

I think most of us would like to work with a deeper, clearer, more powerful sense of mission, and that prayer can play an important role in this.

A story from Mark 1:35-39 can provide some insight. I think you will find that it has something important to say about the relationship, or maybe the possible relationship, between prayer and our work and in particular between prayer and our sense of mission in our work.

The story takes place early in the ministry of Jesus, while he was still in the region of Galilee. Picture the setting: Jesus and his disciples have begun attracting followers and building his ministry in a town called Capernaum. For some reason (we are not told why), Jesus got up while it was still dark and went off to pray by himself.

Listen to how Mark tells the story:

In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found Jesus they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” Jesus answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns so that I may proclaim the message there also for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

It appears that in the process of turning towards God, at night in the dark, Jesus developed a renewed or perhaps a clarified sense of mission. Perhaps he received a new insight or new inspiration. Or perhaps the experience strengthened his resolve in some way.

In the meantime, back in the village, the disciples woke up and saw that Jesus was not there so they went looking for him. When they found him, I would guess that they probably expected that Jesus would return to the village in which they were staying in order to continue his very successful ministry there. That would be the normal thing to do – what most of us would do – keep doing what we find is successful and build on that success.

But instead Jesus announced that they were going to the towns and the villages throughout the region to proclaim the message to a broader range of people.

I believe that this decision led to a greatly expanded ministry with, as I think we know now, much greater impact. Was there a connection between this critical decision and his prayer experience? I am convinced that there was.

There are many ways to pray, but however we do so there is something about turning our attention towards God in prayer that sometimes seems to connect

us with something deeper than ourselves. Maybe it reminds us of who we really are and about how we are connected to God.

That does not mean we will necessarily experience anything so dramatic as a super natural voice or deep life-changing insight or even an immediate answer to a question. But I do think that over time it helps us develop a deeper sense of connection and purpose and mission.

Mark does not tell us how Jesus actually prayed in this particular case but I would guess it was probably silent or listening prayer, what some people might call receptive prayer. With receptive prayer, we might begin by expressing whatever is on our mind, maybe a concern or question of some sort. But then we become quiet and receptive and of course that is the point.

One way to do this is to find a quiet place, a quiet time, sit quietly for a couple of minutes and then turn your attention towards God and pray. You can begin by expressing a concern or worry or sense of gratitude or maybe a question or maybe something entirely different. Express whatever is on your mind. And then sit quietly for a few minutes, prayerfully

If random thoughts come into your mind as you sit quietly, and they usually do, do not worry about them, do not pay them any attention, and especially do not give them any energy by trying to fight them. Just turn your attention towards God and let the thoughts drift away on their own. You will find that this becomes easier and easier to do.

If you try this, please also keep in mind that it is not the method or the technique that matters but your orientation and attitude. The important thing is to turn your attention towards God and to pray in whatever way seems most suitable to you.

There are two additional points I would like to mention, as caveats.

First, if you are hoping for a sudden flash of insight resulting in a new calling, as in the case of Paul on the road to Damascus, I have to say that this is fairly rare. Maybe this happens to some people, but for most of us the sense of call develops over a long period of time, and usually involves a lot of trial and error.

Second, discernment is always necessary, no matter how strong our feeling is that we are being called to do something specific. It is important to remember that we can mislead ourselves – we need to exercise some caution.

We will come to the end of this recording in a minute or two. I recommend that sometime today you find that quiet time, that quiet place, and just sit quietly for a few minutes and pray, maybe along the lines we've talked about. And further recommend that you try to make a habit of praying receptively once or twice a day, or maybe five or six times a week. I think you will find that over time this helps you develop a closer sense of connection with God and a deeper, clearer sense of mission – a sense of mission that will help you in your work.

And that's it for now.

If you would like more information about topics like today's or about the Center for Faith and Enterprise please visit us at faithandenterprise.org.

Thank you for joining us; I hope you will be with us again soon on the Faith and Enterprise podcast.