



Maundy Thursday - April 5, 2012
Ellis White
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

*Loaded Questions:
Are You Asleep?
Mark 14: 32-42*

Later tonight we will remember the last meal Jesus had with his disciples. But before we do that, let us skip forward a few hours from that meal... Judas has already departed. Jesus and the remaining eleven have sung a hymn, gone out from the upper room, and up the Mount of Olives. We pick up the story when they reach the garden of Gethsemane...

Mark 14: 32–42

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." ³³ He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. ³⁴ "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

³⁵ Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ "Abba, [a] Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

³⁷ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? ³⁸ Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

³⁹ Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. ⁴⁰ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

⁴¹ Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Prayer of Illumination

Upon reaching Gethsemane, Jesus surrounds Himself with two rings of supporters. First he leaves the eight and tells them, "Sit here while I pray." As he continues with the inner three—Peter, James and John—he begins to reveal some of his inner struggle, His deep anguish, and the overwhelming pain.

To understand this moment properly, we have to grapple with what Jesus was experiencing right then. This is a big moment in the whole of Scripture, in the whole of creation. Jesus knew that in hours the cross was to come. The flogging and the mocking and the spitting and the excruciating pain of crucifixion were only one night away. And this would be enough to break any man. But this doesn't even scratch the surface of the pain Jesus would experience.

To speak only of a natural human shirking from betrayal, mockery, scourging and death, all heightened by full foreknowledge, is too shallow an answer. Right here, Jesus was faced with being hours away from something he had never experienced, something that since eternity past had never happened. Jesus knew that tomorrow, he would be separated from His own heavenly Father.

In this moment, Jesus cries out to Peter, James and John, "The pain is too much for me to bear. Watch with me. Watch on my behalf—I need you."

The disciples, of course, don't get it at all. All that Jesus has said about what will happen to him, all his words at the table about his broken body and spilled blood—all the re-making of the Passover—are lost on them even now. And so they sleep—no doubt weary, no doubt ignorant. "I mean, it's nighttime, Jesus can't possibly expect us to stay awake all night?"

And Jesus returns, finding them sound asleep. "Are you asleep?" he says, almost with disbelief. "Could you not keep watch for one hour?" "I am here pleading with the Father to give me strength to face what I must tomorrow, and you can't even stay awake for one hour? All I asked was that you kept watch. Just that you stayed awake. Just so I knew you were with me, that you haven't abandoned me. And you couldn't even do that...?"

Saints, the very real and deep question facing us tonight, is simply this: "Are you asleep?"—Because Jesus was not, and is not. Jesus suffered that very night for the needs of the whole world, he stayed awake to battle with the temptation not to be crucified for humanity. Jesus suffered that very night for the needs of your kids, for the needs of your marriage, for the needs of your addictions, for the needs of those less fortunate.

The question facing us all is: "Are you asleep?" Are you asleep to the needs of our kids? Are you sleeping through your marriage? Are you sleeping through your addiction? Are you sleeping through the needs of those less fortunate? Are you sleeping through God speaking to you at church? And if we are very honest with ourselves, the answer is: yes. We aren't following through on our commitments,

we aren't battling our addictions, and we aren't answering God's call to the needs of those in front of us, and we aren't listening to his Word.

Jesus suffers on your behalf, to fight for your marriage, for your kids' lives, for your addiction, for those less fortunate. But he has asked us to keep watch, to stay awake whilst he does this, to stay alert because Satan, the evil one, the tempter, is prowling around us like a roaring lion.

We can't save our marriage, only Jesus can, but we can sleep through it. We can't beat our addictions, only Jesus can, but we can fall asleep and miss seeing that the prowling lion is trying to take us down. We can't save those less fortunate, only Jesus can, but we can be asleep to their needs. Jesus is fighting for us, Jesus will win, Jesus has won, but we must stay awake. And what are we doing...? We are sleeping.

That night Jesus didn't fall asleep, He didn't sleep through the world's needs. Jesus overcame the temptation to drop out, to stop fighting, to not answer the call. Jesus stayed awake. The question before us, is how? How did Jesus manage to do what the disciples did not, and what we so often struggle with too? How did Jesus not sleep through the needs of this world? What should the disciples have done to stay awake? And what must we do, to avoid sleepwalking through this life? The answer to this question is in verse 38.

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.

The key to this battle is prayer. But you may know this. You may have known this for years. But it isn't working. Then listen: Jesus is far more gracious than we can imagine. He not only teaches us that prayer is the key, but he lets us in on exactly how to pray, on how he prays, on how God Himself prays. This passage shows us how Jesus prayed and overcame, and I want to show you how simple and beautiful it is: (1) God is strong, (2) I am weak, but (3) I am willing, (4) repeat.

1. God is strong

To begin with, we must realize the power of the God to whom we pray. Jesus begins in v. 36 by saying, "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you." I wonder, when you were still a child, who did you turn to in your time of need...? Your parents. I tell you, when I was five, I knew my dad could do everything.

My dad could make a kite. My dad could fix any toy I broke. My dad could score goals in soccer. My dad could drive anywhere. My dad could even build a car. My dad could do my homework.

And the truth is, I still have a heavenly Father for whom, as Jesus says, "everything is possible." This is where we must begin. "In the beginning God..." It all starts and ends with Him. He alone can fight for our marriages, kill our

addictions, and fight for the needs of this world. We must start by praying: "God, you are strong."

2. I am weak

The second key to praying against temptation is to confess the weakness of our flesh. As I've grown up, I've become better at doing things. Now I can make kites, fix toys, score goals in soccer, drive anywhere, do my homework. As I now look at my dad, I like to think I am better than him, that I am stronger than him, that I am cleverer than him. The reality is: I have become proud.

This is not a good place to be, especially not when faced with temptation. The thought that I can do it, only leads to failure. I cannot do it. I am not strong enough. I cannot save my marriage. I cannot make my kids love Jesus. I cannot defeat my addictions. I cannot save the world. The only road to success in facing temptation is to confess our weakness. Jesus does this in two ways.

Firstly, v. 35 says "he fell to the ground." In the Jewish tradition standing with arms lifted was the usual posture for prayer. Prostration was a posture of extreme humility. Jesus falling to the ground before His heavenly Father, is Jesus saying: my flesh is weak.

Secondly, Jesus prays in v. 36, "Take this cup from me." Jesus now confessed the weakness of his flesh with his mouth. He says, "I don't think I can do this. This cup of your wrath, which must be poured out on me—please can you take it away. It is too much for my soul to bear."

In the light of who God is, we must turn to ourselves, "I am weak." But without this next point, declaring our weakness is self-defeating.

3. I am willing

Jesus carries on in v. 36: "Not what I will, but what you will." Literally: I am willing to do this. We must show forth the readiness of the spirit. As Jesus tells the disciples in v. 38: "The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Jesus knew what the disciples were struggling with, because he was going through the very same thing... But Jesus didn't fall asleep. Jesus stayed awake to fight for the world's needs. Are we willing to stay awake—to keep watch?

Unless we let our will be God's will, we will never stay awake. The question is: how badly do we want it? Are we willing to pay the price? Staying awake isn't easy. Are you willing? These are questions we need to answer. We must be willing to stay awake. Without it, our marriages will crumble, our addictions will defeat us, and our world will go to pieces. (1) God is strong, (2) I am weak, but (3) I am willing.

4. Repeat

But the truth is, Jesus doesn't stop there. After an hour of prayer, we read in v. 39: "Once more he went away and prayed the same thing." If we are to succeed, we must repeat our prayers. If Jesus went back for more, we must need to too.

When it's easier not to stay awake, when we feel our eyes beginning to close, our vision narrowing, the sounds blurring, we must pray again... and again, and again, and again. We must stay awake, and to do this, we must pray. Don't give up. Even when the battle gets strong, don't fall asleep. Keep praying...God is strong, I am weak, but I am willing.

When you are tempted to sleep through time with your family, you must pray this. When you are driving home after an emotionally exhausting day, and you know you have to be emotionally present with your family, you must pray: God is strong, I am weak, but I am willing. When you pull onto the driveway: God is strong, I am weak, but I am willing. When you open the door: God is strong, I am weak, but I am willing.

When Satan is prowling around you, telling you that you can't survive without that thing, without doing this, without eating this, without drinking this, without looking at that, you must pray: God is strong, I am weak, but I am willing. When you walk through the doors of church and feel utterly exhausted, unable to worship God, you must pray: God is strong, I am weak, but I am willing. When you walk past the man on the street, you must pray: God is strong, I am weak, but I am willing.

For millennia, the Song of Solomon has been interpreted allegorically as the relationship between God and his people—between Christ and his church. And if you take it that way, there is this passage where we, the church, are in bed asleep, but there is this knock at the door. We instantly know who it is—it is Him, the One we love. And we hear his voice...

Open to me...

My head is drenched with dew,
my hair with the dampness of the night.

There is Jesus, standing at the door, his head dripping with sweat, just like in the garden—dripping with drops of blood. And he is calling us to open the door, to let Him in, to get up, to not stay in bed. And what is our response?

I have taken off my robe—
must I put it on again?
I have washed my feet—
must I soil them again?

But I've already got into my pajamas—do I have to take them off again? I've just got clean—do I have to get up and get dirty again?

The truth is, we are all already in bed asleep. Are we willing to get up and keep watch?

God is strong, I am weak, but I am willing. God is strong, I am weak, but I am willing. God is strong, I am weak, but I am willing...