

**Ministry - always done in the context of prayer and community.**

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 6:12-19

### **Introduction**

During winter heavy snow falls hit groves of tall, young trees along a high way. The branches were bowed down with the heavy snow - so low that branches from one tree were often leaning against the trunk or branches of another. Where trees stood alone, the effect of the snow was different. The branches had become heavier and heavier, and since there were no other trees to lean against, the branches snapped. They lay on the ground, dead and alone in the cold snow.

When we serve God in fellowship with Jesus and his friends, the branches of our "minis-tree" lean against the branches of another's, that they may never snap - and die alone...

We should know that ministry begins within the context of prayer and community. That was the case with Jesus in our Bible lesson. And, that was also the case with the early New Testament church. Ministry, witnessing and evangelism begins within the context of prayer and community.

Our Scripture reading is a beautiful story that moves from night to morning to afternoon. Jesus spent the night alone in prayer and meditation with God. In the morning he gathered his apostles around him and formed community. In the afternoon, with his apostles, he went out and preached the Word and healed the sick.

*Notice the order - from prayer to community to ministry.*

It all begins by being alone with God in prayer and meditation; then it creates a fellowship, a community of people who supports us; and finally this community goes out together to heal and to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

Prayer, community, and ministry. That is the pattern by which God acts and speaks through us. That is the pattern God uses to make great things happen. To make divine things happen. This is the pattern through which we become the hands and mouths of God.

### **Prayer:**

The opening verse of our Scripture reading tells us that *"one of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God"* (Luke 6:12). A quick look through the Gospels tells us that Jesus spent a lot of time alone with God in prayer and meditation. Is there any space or time for that in your life?

Why is it so important that you spend time alone with God in prayer? **It is amongst other things important, because this is when we listen to him who says he loves us.** To pray and to contemplate his Word, is to listen to the One who calls you "My beloved daughter," "My beloved son," "My beloved child." To pray is to let that voice speak to the centre of your being.

Who am I? Who are you? I am the beloved, the one loved of God, and you are too.

This is what the voice said that Jesus heard when he came out of the Jordan River after his baptism: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). That's the voice Jesus heard when he was on the Mount of Transfiguration: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Mt 17:5).

But there were many other voices speaking to Jesus too - loud, evil voices. These voices said, "Prove you are the beloved. Do a miracle. Change stones into bread. Test God and jump from the temple. Grab power without going the way of the cross."

But Jesus in effect said, "No, I don't have to prove anything. I am the Son he loves."

Because Jesus listened to the voice of God, he was able to walk powerfully through his life and ministry. People were applauding him, laughing at him; praising him and rejecting him; calling "Hosanna!" and yelling "Crucify him!" But in the midst of all this, Jesus knew that he is the beloved, God's only begotten Son." He clung to that voice through prayer and meditation.

When you pray and ponder God's Word, that same voice speaks to you, telling you, assuring you, that you are loved. That you are not alone! That God is with you.

As was the case with Jesus, there are many other voices speaking to us too. They often too are loud, evil voices. They say: "Prove that you are the beloved." "Prove you are worth something." "Prove you have a contribution to make." "Make a name for yourself." "First of all accumulate power and wealth, and then people will love you; then people will say you are amazing and you are great."

As with Jesus, we have to pray and listen to the voice of God. And, when we do, we can deal with the loud, demoralizing voices trying to persuade us to let go of our calling - our ministries. When we pray, we can deal with success and failure, prosperity and poverty, health and sickness, life and death, rain and drought, summer and winter.

Jesus spent the night in prayer. Alone with God. Meditating. Contemplating. Pondering and being reminded that he was and is God's beloved Son.

We too need to pray. We too need to spend time alone with God. We too need to contemplate and ponder God's Word.

Take a passage of Scripture. Or even one verse. Think about it for a while. Let it fill your being, your thoughts, your heart, until the words are written on all your inner places.

This is not easy to do. The trouble is, as soon as you sit and become quiet, you think that you forgot to do something. That you need to call so and so. What you have to put on the grocery list. That you need to finish your assignment. Or, you spend the time thinking and dreaming about being with someone you dearly miss. It is not easy to sit down and listen to God. But, like Jesus, we need to take the time.

A time alone with God is where ministry begins. That is where it began for Jesus. That is where it begins for us. Without prayer we will doubt our calling, loose heart, become despondent, forget to trust in God and forget that our ministry is as big and as powerful, as our God.

### **Community.**

What did Jesus do after he spent the night praying and meditating? The Bible has this to say:

*(Luke 6:13) When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles ...*

After prayer and after solitude, comes community. Jesus formed a community of 13, including himself. Why did Jesus form this community? Strange as it may sound, but Jesus needed community. He needed fellowship. He needed friends in serving God.

Remember the Garden of Gethsemane? Jesus wanted and needed the community of his 3 closest friends to be with him, to support him in his darkest hour. He needed them to sustain and encourage him. He wanted them to pray with him and for him. He wanted them to keep watch with him.

Remember Paul. He never travelled alone. He had problems with John Mark. He had an argument with Barnabas. He could have said, "Forget this community stuff. From now on I am travelling alone. It is easier that way."

But no! He always took someone with him. He needed Christian community to be faithful to his calling. If anyone could have been working in isolation from other Christians, it was Paul. But he knew better.

If Jesus, almighty God, without sin, perfect in every way and knowing all things, needed community to do ministry, we certainly do too. And if Paul - who experienced the most blessed ministry of all apostles - needed Christian community to carry out his ministry, we certainly do too. None of this "I do not need anybody else to serve God and to remain faithful to my calling". Jesus did not believe in this "being a Christian without the church" stuff we often hear about in our culture.

The Bible commands and encourages us to seek community with each other, in order for us to grow and develop and mature as believers. The Bible commands and encourages Christian community, that we can support each other and encourage each other. The Bible commands and encourages community, that we can pray for each other. The Bible commands and encourages us to seek community, that we can engage in ministry and make a difference to his cause in the world.

As a community we can do far more ministry than any of us can do as individuals. Do you know what community does? Community acts like a kind of sound amplification system. By myself I cannot support a missionary in Morocco, or sustain the work of the Bible Society, or reach out to the un-churched and de-churched folk in my neighbourhood. But in the UPCSA I am part of a community that supports many church plants and outreaches. It's care and discipline keep me safe, support and maintain my vision and strengthen my calling.

### **Ministry**

Jesus spent the night in prayer and fellowship with God. In the morning he chose twelve close friends to form a community with him. In the afternoon he began to do ministry. Listen to what our Scripture reading says:

*(Luke 6:17-19) He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, (18) who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, (19) and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.*

I think the disciples made a very practical contribution to the work Jesus did that day. Its hard to control such a huge crowd. There were many logistical challenges. Some of the sick people might have fainted while waiting their turn to be healed and needed assistance. The women probably offered water, or a piece of bread to some of them who were weak and hungry. Jesus, preaching, healing and delivering needed practical support, apart from friendship and encouragement. Jesus needed community to do the work his Father gave him to do. But with his friends in attendance, helping and supporting him, he did an enormous, amazing job that day.

Jesus has given us an enormous job to do. He has given us an awesome responsibility. How can we possibly live up to what he expects?

Within the context of prayer and community, we can do ministry. Within the context of prayer and community we can bring the message of Christ to a hostile culture, we can be witnesses to Christ, we can make disciples of all nations, we can make the most of every opportunity and take advantage of the opportunities the Lord gives us.

There is no need for us to be scared. There is no need for us to feel overwhelmed. All that we have to do, is to do what Jesus did.

Jesus spent the night alone in prayer, being encouraged by God, his Father. In the morning he gathered his apostles around him and formed community. In the afternoon, with his apostles, he went out and preached the Word and healed the sick. We should be like Jesus in the way we approach our calling and our service to God and there is no end to what we can do.

May you be blessed as you serve God in fellowship with Jesus and his friends. May the branches of your “minis-tree” lean against the branches of another’s, that they may never snap - and die alone..

This is the Word of God.  
Amen.