

LIKE JESUS - 3

I am not as impressed by statistics as some of my friends are. If 180 people attend church here on Sunday morning and suddenly it jumps to 200 and stays there, have we improved? I have no way of knowing. How can we measure the devotion and commitment of mere numbers? Do statistics reveal the heart? Something is attracting more people, but what? Hitler attracted a lot of people. Bears and flies are both drawn to honey. Would we rather walk the Christian Path with 5 others, or feel the exhilaration of 15,000 who name the Name but don't really care about the reality? No doubt there are more than 5 among the 15,000 who know the reality and are truly intentional about walking the Path. But how do we find them, and how much influence can they have on the attitudes and purposes of the lives of the 15,000? It's hard to escape it: life in the fast lane - and life in the numbers game - is also life in the shallows.

A recent Gallup Poll tells us that 41% of the people in the United States are attending church or synagogue on a weekly basis. Gallup reported this same statistic (41% in church or synagogue each week) in 1995, 1991, 1981, and 1939. Statistically speaking, the religious health and participation of our country is the same as it was 65 years ago, though over the years I have heard dire predictions about the demise of the church, especially about the younger generation and how young people aren't religious anymore or that the church isn't reaching them anymore. Often people tell me, from various stances and perspectives, that "nobody is religious out there like they used to be." But just like always, the statistics say that 41% of the people in our country attend church or synagogue weekly (which is better than the 4% in Sweden, and not nearly as good as the 89% in Nigeria).

More intriguing to me is that 90% of the people in our country claim to believe in God and pray at least once every day, and yet only 41% claim to participate in church or synagogue weekly. What about the other 49%? It flat out escapes me how a person can claim to believe in God, or Jesus, and spend no part of his or her life trying to strengthen any group or organization here on earth that bears His name. I have never been able to understand that. I must have a blind spot, and it must be a big one, since 49% of our population claims to love God but has no desire or intention of doing anything for him, or at least not so he

will get any of the credit - that is, they love God but not in a way that anybody else might ever be drawn to him. It simply dumbfounds me that 49% of our population thinks there is no connection between belief and commitment. But at least the 41% *does* know there is a connection between belief and commitment. And despite all the dead weight, they manage to accomplish amazing things. And from everything I can see, they are having lots more fun and living far better lives for knowing it.

That makes me feel much better. Because if I thought 90% of the people of this country were praying every day, and being serious about it - taking it in any way to heart, claiming any kind of loyalty or allegiance to God no matter how confused, inept, or prone to error or sin or mistakes - if I thought 90% of us were seriously praying every day and yet we were still in the condition and state we are in, then I really would be discouraged.

So I suspect that many people are sincerely claiming to pray every day, but they don't mean what I think prayer means. Perhaps they are talking about giving God a piece of their minds - ordering God around, giving God helpful suggestions, making requests, begging favors - but it has nothing to do with how they live or make decisions, or what they truly trust, or what they are living for. If that is what they mean by prayer, then I can understand why prayer isn't making much difference to them, or for them. I find it impossible to imagine that this whole country is waking up every morning and that nine out of every ten of us are laying our lives and our days before the Lord - waiting in humble obedience for the guidance, correction, realignment, and strength to do God's will - and then walking into the day with one purpose above all others: to be faithful and receptive and obedient to God throughout that day. It is hard for me to imagine that this is the reality behind our nation's life, when life in our country is still as scarred and marred as it is.

So I don't really know or care very much about the statistics. I do know and care quite a bit about Jesus. He's the One who points to LIFE and light beyond anything we have ever known in this world. He is the One who keeps claiming, with His own life as collateral, that God loves us and will save us, no matter what happens in this world - no matter what has happened, is happening, or ever will happen here. And for that very reason, I am more than curious about how He behaved as a man here: How did He react and respond to all the joy, pathos, anger, and love that goes on here? What did He think was

important, and what did He do with His time and energy? What did He care about, and how did He manage and handle the things He believed within the context of all the demands, threats, and expectations of this life? It is a wonderment, a life-long wonderment. And especially so for those of us who decide that in some fashion we want to “follow” Him. Yes, especially so for those of us who conclude that if there is some way to translate from His time to ours, from His context to ours, from His identity and purpose under God to ours, then we have no higher agenda in life - no better purpose or goal or desire - than to *follow* Him.

When I think about what Jesus was like, from what we can tell from the records we have, for me the one thing that stands out above all others is that He was a man of prayer. His role models, His heroes, were some of history’s most fervent pray-ers: Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah, Isaiah (to name a few). Jesus knew their stories, admired them, learned from them, and put it all together in His own life. Behind all that Jesus did and said and refused to do, there stood their legacy. Yet with and beyond that, the only explanation I can find - the only source, the only possibility - for the life He lived is this thread and theme that runs through it all: He was a man of prayer.

Saying that is not enough. There are many different kinds of prayer. It is clear to most of us that Jesus was saying more than “Now I lay me down to sleep.” He was saying more than “Please give me ...” or “Please protect me ...” or even “Please bless me ... or them ... or us.” On some profound level, that still sends shivers up the spine: *He was listening* - listening for the whisper of the ONE whose agenda was greater than His own. And when He heard ... when He *heard* ... well, “that was all she wrote”: Total obedience. Complete subservience. Or, to put it in our language and on our level, which is always precisely where He put it: when it seemed to Him that He understood what God was asking of Him, He went for it with single-minded, whole-hearted passion and devotion. “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” (Søren Kierkegaard)

We are impressed by Jesus’ love, but I end up even more impressed by His prayer, because that is *where* His kind of love comes from - this unusual, passionate, unnerving love that is for LIFE (but not as we understand it), and against death (but not as we understand it).

How I wish I could say something to inspire all of us to be more constant and obedient and joyful in our prayers. Surely it’s true that if we want to be more “like Jesus,” this is the most important of all.

This is the source of all the rest. We can mimic all the other traits, characteristics, values, and morals that we find - or think we find - and still be off the mark or out of tune. The timing can still be off, or the emphasis somehow wrong, because we are still trying to do it without the Conductor - or we are still trying to be the Conductor ourselves.

Jesus, if you will indulge me, was the best First Violinist the world has ever known. Many others have played well, some could play nearly as well as He did (technically speaking). But though great skill is impressive, that was not His secret. Nobody before or since has ever watched the Conductor as well as He did. And if the sign came to change the beat, to stop or start or change the emphasis, He was right there - He stayed with the Conductor. No matter how strange or unusual it might have seemed to the familiar expectations about how the piece should be played - no matter how many traditions and assumptions surrounded and sealed the way the piece was supposed to be played - Jesus' eyes were *always* on the Conductor. And if God changed the beat, Jesus was instantly with him - not wandering on through the notes on His own time for a half measure, or for two days, or for four years ... like I do. "Let's change from Torah to Gospel." *You've got it.* "They're too frightened to think straight - we need to reveal the true extent of my mercy and grace." *Absolutely - less judgment and more miracles, especially healing.* "Now, don't make them weak or self-focused." *No Sir - your Kingdom will always be the real goal.* "You've done it so well, and made it so clear, but they are still feeling hurt and betrayed - I'm afraid we need to demonstrate it." *Well ... not my will but thine be done.*

When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, the dove descended, so to speak. And our tradition still remembers what that means, still honors it in the ritual of baptism. But the change comes when we honor it in real life as well. If we want to be *like* Jesus, we must become people of prayer - His kind of prayer. That is what baptism means: The dove also comes to us. Receive the Holy Spirit. From now on, the old life - where we get to be the Conductor, for good or for ill - is dead and gone. And it doesn't matter in the slightest whether it's for good or for ill that we are trying to be the Conductor. It is our trying to *be* the Conductor that fights the Kingdom of God, not whether we are trying to do good or harm, or be selfish or unselfish. Christianity is not about whether we are trying to be good or bad. Christianity is about whether we are trying to *follow* the Conductor or *be* the Conductor (of our own lives).

You do know that most folk think religion is about making them be good, don't you? And since they are already trying to be good (most of the time, and by their own best light), they don't see any reason to become more religious than they already are. No church and no creed can make them want to be better or try any harder. And they are dead right about that. They are designed and created by God; nothing is wrong with the mainframe. In fear and pain we sometimes do a lot of evil, but nobody *wants* to be evil. We would all love to be good, to be far better than we are. The problem is we won't follow the Conductor. We don't trust or believe in God's love enough to let go of our own conducting. So we keep trying to *prove* and *improve* and *impress* in ways that cannot carry us where we most need and want to go. Christianity is about whether we are trying to *follow* the Conductor or *be* the Conductor. I wonder if it would be okay to ask you to clarify this for people out there who don't know this yet.

Some people think *you think* they are going to Hell because they are bad – and that they are bad because they don't believe right. I *know* that's not what you think, but that's what they think you think. That's because they have run into many Christians who don't comprehend their own faith, yet. Hell is the aloneness and fear of thinking we have to be our own Conductor. Most people are already in the bondage of Hell and need to be freed. Why do you think it's so hard here? "*Christ has come to set us free.*" (Galatians 5:1) It's not about being bad or good. It's about following a Conductor greater than ourselves. Many of you know this – don't you think you should tell some of the others?

Have you received the Holy Spirit? Are you trying to let the Holy Spirit run your life – instead of letting your self, or letting somebody else? Are you trying to watch the Conductor? Are we people of prayer – a total-willingness-in-obedience kind of prayer? That is what matters – and where it matters – if we are trying to *follow* Jesus. According to the Gallup Poll, nine out of every ten Americans pray every day. But I don't think this is the kind of prayer most of them are talking about. Is it the kind of prayer we are talking about around here?

Maybe we can at least confess together that it is the kind of prayer we *want* to have ruling our lives – the kind of prayer we sometimes pray, and long to pray more often. It's a funny thing about the Christian Life: There is no way to cheat. We don't just "up and do it" one fine day because we take a notion to. We have to grow into it, even after we've

decided we want it more than anything else in life. Deciding to be a great violinist is an important choice. It's hard to imagine anybody ever playing very well without making that choice. It's certainly the first step. But after that, it still takes years of constant practice. And we keep thinking it's the practice and our great playing skill that make all the difference. But how long have we been practicing and playing just as well as we possibly can? It is following the Conductor that makes all the difference. No matter how beautiful our notes, only the Conductor knows the true music. Notes all by themselves are no symphony, just as "Christians" running their own lives are never part of the Kingdom of God.

So we watch Jesus at prayer:

He spends forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry. And Jesus says to the tempter: "*It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'*" (Matthew 4:4) And usually people think Jesus means the Scriptures, but I think He means prayer even more than the Scriptures. (And the proof is that the Scriptures of His day could not contain Him.) Jesus spends all night in prayer before choosing the twelve disciples. He goes up the mountain to pray. He goes into the wilderness to pray. He goes to a lonely spot to pray. When John the Baptist is killed, He goes apart to pray. When someone is sick, when He is tired, when His strategy is in question ... Jesus goes to pray. And along with the obvious, there are entrancing hints: "*This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.*" (Mark 9:29) And all of us know about a garden called Gethsemane.

We hear Jesus talking about prayer:

The disciples figure out that prayer is the source of Jesus' wisdom and power and, when He returns from prayer one day, they say, "*Lord, teach us to pray*" (Luke 11:1-4) His reply we call "The Lord's Prayer," but it took years before most of them learned to truly pray it. And oh how we still long to be able to. We aren't talking about the kind of prayers we have time for in church. "*Go into your room and shut the door,*" He said, "*and pray in secret where your Father, who hears in secret, will attend you.*" (Matthew 6:5-15) Don't pray like the ministers, heaping up empty phrases to impress people. (Well, that's not the only kind of prayers some of us ministers pray.)

And we hear Jesus say:

“Pray for those who persecute you.” Do you do that? (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:28)

“Pray to the Lord of the harvest to send more help.” Do you do that? (Luke 10:2)

“Two men went up into the temple to pray.” God was only willing to listen to one of them. Do you know which one, and why - and do you pray like he did? (Luke 18:10)

“He told them a parable - that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” Do you know it? Do you get it? Do you do it? (Luke 18:1ff)

“Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”

Do you believe that? (Matthew 21:22; Mark 11:24) A friend of mine says there’s always a catch - and with Jesus, the power is always hidden in the catch. (Another friend said to me, “I never understood Jesus’ parables until I started playing Super Mario Brothers. There’s always another layer beyond the one I’ve figured out.” He thought Jesus’ parables were the computer games of the first century A.D., only they had a bigger payoff.)

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Once upon a time there were ten maidens. And usually their story is used to illustrate notions of being shut out of the “Second Coming.” Maybe so, maybe so. But I doubt it.

The lamps are for light, and light comes from burning the oil - *and the oil is prayer*. At least that’s what I think. The maidens wait for the bridegroom, who gives meaning and joy to life, symbolized by the celebration. To us a strange symbol, perhaps, but clearly a symbol of the Kingdom. In the Palestine of Jesus’ day, the wedding celebration would have lasted about a week, and it was the business of the bridegroom to start it all by arriving at the most unexpected hour he could pick. That was part of the fun. And it was the business of the friends to be on hand whenever he arrived to claim his bride. The groom could delay for several days, if he chose. He was only required to send a runner just in front of him to cry out “The bridegroom is coming!” And the groom would then escort the bride from her father’s house to his own house in a great and joyous procession. So you knew it was about to happen

and you had some warning, but not very much. If you missed his coming, you were actually shut out of the week-long party and celebration. That penalty was part of the fun too - the stakes were high. It was your punishment for not being attentive enough.

That is the analogy Jesus chooses: The Kingdom is like a wedding procession. Oil feeds the light - prayer fuels our guidance and our strength. For a while we can run on past inspiration, but then the light goes out. Furthermore, we can never know when new inspiration will come - when we will get a new visitation, new instructions, a new assignment, or further instructions on the assignment we are already working on. But if we don't have the oil of prayer, we miss it; the party (the Kingdom) goes on without us - without our participation, without our awareness. Pretty soon we find ourselves wandering down some dark street, all alone, and we cannot even hear the music from the celebration anymore. Then we find ourselves wondering if there ever was a wedding in the first place; maybe we just made it up, our souls wanting it so badly that our minds merely dreamed it. You've been there? Oh, I have! And always it is because I have run out of oil.

Anyway, the bridegroom shows up and the foolish five say: "Loan me some of your prayers, for I haven't been saying mine lately." "Loan me some of your character, for I have been neglecting my spiritual growth lately." "Loan me some of your relationship with God, because I've been busy with other things lately." Some oil is nontransferable.

Above all other things, prayer is at the source of all the rest we know and admire about Jesus. But it was a very special kind of prayer: *humility in obedience* kind of prayer; *watch the Conductor* kind of prayer; *not my will but thine be done* kind of prayer; *there is no excuse big enough, no other purpose more important* kind of prayer. Thus Jesus kept accomplishing the impossible, because the impossible was not at all His aim. His aim was to please and serve and obey God. Not other people, not pretty sayings, not things written in a book, not rules, golden or any other color - just God. His aim was to please and serve and obey God. And in order to do that, He constantly had to go to the inner place where the two of them could get it clear, and keep it clear, between them. Jesus was, more than anything else, a man of prayer.

In deep humility, but also with deep conviction, I suggest that if we want to be "more like Jesus," this kind of prayer, more than anything else, is what we must practice.

PRAYER

You who are our Creator, we are grateful for this day in which to be alive. We do not know how many days we have, but we are grateful for this day. Often our minds are busy with all that is to come, and with all that scares us, and with all that we think is wrong. And sometimes it seems clear that Your presence is in those thoughts, calling us to do things we have not yet done. Yet we are also grateful for this very day. What a miracle it is to be alive in this moment, to know the people around us, to feel Spring spreading across the land. How incredible to have voices to sing with, minds to be aware with, and whatever it is You have put within us that feels love, and knows Your presence. Much there is to do, and much there is to come. But we are also grateful for this very day in which to be alive, Lord. Let us go on living it with praise in our hearts for You. And let us live it, we pray, with You ... and for You. Amen.