

“Gethsemane: A Place of Strength” – Luke 22:39-46

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February 24, 2016

Periodically, our world has calls us back to simplicity. Simpler is easier, more profitable, it seems to say. Companies are downsizing. Products are marked “All Natural Ingredients.” People are practicing the Paleo Diet. *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* says Robert Fulghum, and Stephen Covey talks about *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. A call to return to the simple, to the essentials of life. In all of this, there is the idea (and there is some truth to it) that if we just reduce life to the essentials, get back to the basics, halt the quest for more and return to what really matters, life will get easier. Simplicity will produce serenity. Clarity will mean less struggle. So our world is calling us back to the basics, and yet isn’t it amazing how sometimes the simplest things, the very basics of life, can produce the greatest struggles.

Take for instance two words: “I do.” Simple words. Simple words that start a lifetime of commitment. With these words, you promise to seek not your own interests but the interests of another. How simple the words, yet how hard the commitment. “Should I put my husband into a home?” your neighbor asks you and, after she asks, an hour-long conversation of facts and feelings and six months full of decisions and indecision pours forth. “If I help him stay at home, he feels secure and is happy, but he has fallen lately, and his mind is failing, and I worry about him, and think he’d be better off in a home. If I place him into a home, he’ll have all the care in the world, the opportunity to make friends, and daily activities. But can any of that cure a broken heart? Can twenty-four-hour nursing replace our marriage? He doesn’t want to go. Shouldn’t I honor his wishes?” As you listen, you realize that these words have been said before to another: to God in long nights of prayer. She offered Him her tears and anger, her fear and love. And all of this comes out of two simple words said not quite thirty-eight years ago: “I do.” For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health? “I do.” And so, your neighbor is standing there, in front of you, still saying “I do” as best she can. But for her, the simple things in life have become the greatest struggle.

As Luke tells the story of our Lord’s prayer in the garden, he wants us to notice that our Lord’s agony is over the simple work of His life. Doing His Father’s will; taking upon Himself the cup of God’s anger; dying for our sin. That is what this prayer is about. It can be summarized in one simple sentence. Luke writes, “[Jesus] withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, ‘Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but

Yours, be done'” (22:41–42). That is all of the actual prayer that we hear. In less than ten seconds, we have heard Jesus’ prayer, and then we are on to the rest of the story. It’s easy for us not to recognize the struggle. Perhaps for that very reason, Luke goes to great lengths to describe the agony. In anguish, Jesus prays. Earnestly, He offers His words. Sweat like blood falls to the ground as the life of our Lord flows out in prayer. An angel of God lifts the veil of heaven to come to His Maker’s aid. What did Jesus say in all of this anguish? Luke only records one sentence. “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done.” How long did Jesus pray? Luke doesn’t say. We only know that it was long enough for the disciples to fall asleep. Luke doesn’t describe all the words, and he doesn’t describe all the hours, because there’s really no need for that. Anyone who has been there knows. Anyone who has ever said yes to the will of God in this world knows how long those nights can be.

Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself. Be faithful to your spouse. Care for your children. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Simple words. Simple words to guide us in this life, and yet anyone who has said “I do” to these simple words knows how strong the struggle can be. When one’s father is dying of cancer, when one’s child is not coming home at night, when one’s spouse is absent in long hours at work and silence in the bedroom, the agony is strong and the nights of prayer are long. Words can no longer contain the depth of our pain, and so we find ourselves saying the same thing again and again and again. Time stands still as emotions rush by: sorrow at what is being lost, joy at what for a time had been found, fear at what could happen, hope for what might be, confidence that God is watching, uncertainty that He hears, anger at our situation, compassion for our loved one, longing for it all to be over, fear that it could all end. We watch, and we pray, and we cry, and we fear, and soon, in exhaustion, we simply . . . fall asleep. There is only so much agony that we can bear, and our lives, like the disciples, shut down under the struggle. Luke tells us that the disciples slept that night a sleep like no other: “sleeping from sorrow” (v. 45). There are times in our lives when we are brought to that place of agony and sorrow from the simplest things. Desiring to do the things of God can lead to places of deep exhaustion and sorrow in our lives.

Yet, our Lord continues to pray. While the disciples sleep from sorrow, while God’s people fail under the power of the struggle, while the world is too weak to accomplish the will of God, Jesus goes on. Jesus prays. Jesus rises to awaken His disciples. Jesus does His Father’s will. By showing us this contrast, Luke reveals to us that there is one thing stronger than even the simplest sorrow, and that is the simplest love: God’s love for the world giving His only Son that whosoever believes in

Him should not perish but have everlasting life. Here, we see that love of God. The Father's will is to give up His Son, to forsake Him in punishment for the sin of the world. The Son's desire is to do the will of His Father, laying down His life that all the world might be saved. Only God could love like that, and only God could serve like that. A Father's love, a Son's service, and a world's salvation are all gathered here tonight in this garden and offered up to God in the agony of this prayer. And what Luke wants us to know by recording this prayer is that God's love is stronger than sorrow: Jesus in willing obedience submits to the will of His Father and says, "Thy will be done." Jesus enters our places of sorrow and makes them places of His strength.

God's will overcame human weakness that night. His love made a place of sorrow a place of strength. Tonight, then, I encourage you to live in that comfort. Yes, tomorrow we return to a world where the simplest things can create the greatest struggles. The simple will of God for us and our neighbor can produce times of agony and trial in our life. But God's love is beyond our loving, and God's strength is beyond our weakness. Nothing in this world can ever separate you from that love. God forgives your sins. He claims your life as His own, and "He who did not spare His one Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). There is nothing in this world that God's love has not conquered, and there is nothing that can separate you from that love. Your life is in His hands and, when you are there, you are in the hands of the one who made you and loves you.

Tonight, our Lord assures us that we are in the hands of our Maker. He conquered our weakness in the garden, so there is nothing that can separate us from His love. When we engage in those long nights of prayer, we pray to a God who listens. When we don't have the words to express the depth of our feeling, He has given us His Spirit, interceding with groans that are too deep for words, bringing what our mouths cannot say to the heart of God, who hears. Even on those nights when we fall asleep from sorrow, we sleep in the kingdom of a God who loves. Sleep then. Rise then. Pray and labor knowing that you are members of a Kingdom where God watches over His loved ones even in their sleep. He has prepared a place for you to go in times of struggle and sorrow. A place of His loving strength. Rest now in His love. Rest now in His strength. Amen.