

Have you ever heard of a Hail Mary? That phrase comes from when the angel came to Mary and greeted her. Some of you may have grown up, like I did, praying a prayer, which started with those words. We also use this phrase in the context of football. You know, with time running out, the team who is losing desperately chucks the ball down the field with just a prayer that someone on his team will catch it in the end zone.

I want to talk about that—not football—but prayer. Certainly when we pray, we're often desperate, but hopefully, we have more chance at success than a ball thrown 60 yards downfield at the end of a game has of being caught! I want to talk about the spiritual practice of prayer. To do that, I want us to start by focusing on Mary, but not the Mary you're thinking of. I want to focus on another Mary—Mary of Bethany.

A Story of a Good Meal Gone Bad

Mary's story is found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10. It takes place towards the end of Jesus' life. He and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem for the last time, and they're passing through the small village of Bethany. It was in Bethany some of Jesus' best friends lived—Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus. Often in his ministry, their home was a refuge where Jesus would relax and unwind. When Mary and Martha heard Jesus and his disciples were passing through, she invited him over for a meal. But this is a story of a good meal gone bad.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" (Luke 10:38–40)

It's no small task to have people over for dinner, especially someone as important to you as Jesus was to these two sisters. If you add the twelve disciples and Lazarus to the mix, you have 16 people to serve, and that's enough to make even Martha Stewart cringe.

Notice how these two women responded to this challenge differently. Martha was a frenzy of activity. I wonder if it was one of those meals where nothing was working. She couldn't get the fire just right, or she didn't put enough leaven in the bread, or the vegetables got cold while the lamb took forever to cook.

The worst thing about it all was her sister wasn't lifting a finger. I imagine Martha calling from the kitchen for Mary to come and give her a hand. When nothing happens, Martha stomps into the living room only to find Mary serenely sitting at Jesus' feet listening to his words. We don't know what Mary was thinking, but somehow the presence of Jesus in her home captured her attention so completely that serving food seemed secondary.

At this point, Martha boils over. Yet she doesn't scold her sister; instead, she scolds Jesus, *"Master, don't YOU care that my sister has left me to do all the serving? Tell her to give me a hand!"*

I'm sure that Martha felt this was a reasonable request. It seems like it to me. I'd expect Jesus to send Mary scurrying into the kitchen to do her part. It's only fair, right? Didn't Jesus say the greatest among you would be the servant of all? But Jesus surprises us. He spoke not to Mary but to Martha. Look at vv. 41–42.

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

You don't have to be a scholar to see Mary gets the high grade and Martha gets the low one. I don't know about you, but that bothers me. I'd expect Martha to get a pat on the back and Mary a kick in the pants.

Mary Allowed the Lord to Serve Her

You see, like many of you, deep down I connect with Martha's of this world. Martha is a realist. She knows what needs to get done. She knows if you're going to feed 16 people, someone has to hustle. It doesn't happen sitting down. I mean let's face it, if it weren't for the Martha's of this world, nothing would ever get done. Very few businesses would make a profit. Very few children would get bathed and ready for bed at night. Very few churches would grow. I have a deep appreciation for the Martha's in our church. They work the sound booth, serve in the nursery, and set up and fold chairs. Jesus doesn't fault them for that. Service is a good thing.

In the passage just prior to this one Jesus told a story about a Samaritan who served; he saw a need and did what he could to meet that need. In so doing, according to Jesus, he exemplified what it means to obey one of the two great commandments—love your neighbor as yourself. It seems to me it's the Martha's

of this world, not the Mary's, who are the good neighbors. When they see people weary in need of a place to rest and eat, they're the ones who open their home, extend their hand, and work to meet that need. That's the kind of woman Martha was. Jesus doesn't fault her or anyone else for that.

So what's the problem? The problem isn't our service, but the spirit of our service. Our spirit can spoil our service. This can happen in a number of ways. It can spoil it for us. Notice Jesus describes Martha as *"worried and bothered about so many things."* There's no joy in Martha's spirit in this story, only frustration.

The spirit of our service also affects those around us. Martha's spirit affected Mary. She doesn't quietly come into the room and whisper, "Mary, could you help me for just a minute." No, she makes a grandstand play and announces to Jesus and everyone within earshot her sister is a slug. Think about how this would have made Mary feel. Think of how the disciples felt watching it. Have you ever gone to a home as a guest and as soon as you walked into the house you could feel the tension. You're not sure what, but something is going on between the courses, which is thicker than the gravy. The meal may be wonderful, but you can't wait to get out of there. That was how the disciples felt.

Finally, our spirit can even spoil our relationship with the Lord. In Martha's mind, this was to be a night to remember. God's Son would be at her table! But she ends up not only angry at her sister but also angry at the Lord. *"Lord, don't you care...?"* That's an accusation! She even tells him what to do about it!

But Jesus not only diagnoses the problem, he also points out the solution. He says Mary's chosen the *"one thing necessary; the good part which can't be taken away from her."* What did Mary choose? She chose to sit at his feet and listen. I don't think this is a plea for us to serve less and sit around more. Jesus isn't telling us to watch more T.V. or take a longer vacation. What Mary chose to do was place herself in a position where the Lord could minister to her. While Martha started with trying to **do** something for Jesus, Mary started with trying to **receive** something from Jesus.

Prayer is Allowing the Lord to Minister to Us

But what is the "one thing" that's necessary? Some people "one thing" is all about knowing the word, after all, that's what Mary is doing—listening to his word. There's no question the Word of God is something we should listen to. But I believe this is about more than just hearing the Word. Remember in the previous story of the Good Samaritan? The two guys who knew the Word the best, the priest and the Levite, were the ones who failed to do what they should have done. This is about more than just knowing the Word.

Instead, I believe what Mary is demonstrating for us is a spirit of prayer. Prayer is how we allow the Lord to minister to us. It's no

mistake immediately following this story the disciples come to Jesus and ask, *"Lord, teach us to pray."* Jesus taught them what we call the Lord's Prayer. I believe Luke sandwiched this story of Mary and Martha between the story of the Good Samaritan and the Lord's Prayer on purpose. He wanted us to know before we can be a Good Samaritan; we have to sit at his feet. Sitting at his feet and listening to him is about prayer. Prayer is at least one of the ways we allow the Lord to serve us.

I wonder if that surprises you like it did me. For a long time, I viewed prayer solely as a form of service; something I did for God or for my neighbor. But more and more I've come to view prayer as a way of letting him serve me.

Years ago, I coached my ten-year-old son's soccer team. These kids would get on the field, and all they wanted to do was chase the ball around, but that's no way to play soccer. So I learned the importance of sitting the boys down and taking just a few minutes to talk with them. As a coach, this was my time to connect with those boys. If I didn't do that, they would run on empty come game time on Saturday. They had to hear **from** me before they can play **for** me. One of the ways we hear from Jesus is by sitting at his feet in a spirit of prayer.

In the last few years, I've learned to redefine prayer. I used to see it as talking to God about all the things I needed him to do for me. But I've learned that prayer is a conversation with God, which includes me listening to him. As I listen to him, I hear him call me his "beloved child." I let him hold me and minister to me at the deepest part of my being. That's why Jesus taught us to start the Lord's Prayer with *"Our Father..."* To say it and believe it is to let God minister to you. It's to come into his presence and remember you come to One who takes pleasure in you as his beloved child.

Jesus Practiced this Kind of Prayer

We know even Jesus, the Son of God, made it a habit to be alone with God in prayer. All four of the gospel writers made this clear. After reporting John the Baptist was murdered by King Herod, Matthew said, *"When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place"* (Matthew 14:13).

In the first chapter of Mark's gospel, he said, *"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed"* (Mark 1:35).

Luke, in particular, tells us Jesus was a man of prayer. He says, *"Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed"* (Luke 5:16). It appears this was our Lord's habit—retreating from the crowds to pray.

And John tells us on the night of his betrayal, while with his disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus *"looked toward heaven and prayed"* (John 17:1). John even devotes the entire 17th chapter of his Gospel to Jesus' prayer for his disciples and for us.

The Early Church Practiced this Kind of Prayer.

No wonder after the resurrection, when the early disciples gathered together it says, *“They all joined together constantly in prayer”* (Acts 1:14). And a bit later it says of the early church, *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”* (Acts 2:42).

Later, Paul told the Romans to be *“faithful in prayer”* (Rom. 12:12). He told the Colossians to *“devote yourselves to prayer”* (Col. 4:2). He told the Thessalonians to *“pray without ceasing”* (1 Thess. 5:17). He told the Philippians, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God”* (Phil 4:6). Finally, he told the Ephesians to *“pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”* Then he added, *“With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people”* (Eph. 6:18).

Paul wasn’t the only one. Peter said, *“Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray”* (1 Peter 4:7). James said, *“The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”* (James 5:16).

And if you want to know how precious your prayers are to God, consider this: In Revelation 8, John described a scene in heaven after the seals were broken on the scrolls, which tell the story of human sin and God’s judgment. Then an amazing thing happened. John said, *“There was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”* Then an angel with a golden censer came to the altar and offered incense, which represented the prayers of God’s people. It said, *“The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand.”* Then came God’s judgment on the earth with thunder, lightning, and earthquakes. Now get this: all these acts are in response to the prayers of the saints. Normally we think of events on earth being interrupted because of actions taken in heaven. But, here it’s the other way around. Heaven comes to a standstill. The endless praises of heavenly hosts stop. Why? Because someone is praying. All of heaven stops so the prayers of the saints—your prayers and mine—can rise before God. Not only are they heard, but they also matter. That’s what happens when people pray. It’s been said, “History belongs to the intercessors,” and it’s true.

We Have the Ear of God

The amazing thing about all of this is as followers of Jesus; we have the ear of God. He invites us to talk with him, he hears us, and our prayers make a difference.

At the same time, prayer can be hard work for us. Few believers I know are satisfied with their prayer life. Most of us feel as if we should pray more, pray better, and pray more effectively. That’s why the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to do it. The surprising thing about this is these were Jews, and Jews knew all about praying. But they saw something in the way Jesus

prayed, which was new to them. There was an ease, intimacy, and freedom they’d never experienced. They hungered for it, so they asked, “Teach us to pray like that.”

Here’s an important truth: Prayer is learned behavior. Nobody is born good at it. We’ll always feel like beginners in the art of praying. But we can get better at it, and to that end, I want to give you some practical help. I don’t want to turn this into a formula—this may look a bit different for each of us depending on our temperament, season of life, and our circumstances. But here are a few suggestions to enrich your prayer life.

Suggestions for Prayer

Have a time and place: First of all, set a time and place for prayer. It might be in the morning, at noon, or at night. It might be at home or in the office. Jesus said to go into your closet and shut the door. He also told us to leave our smartphones somewhere else (ha-ha). But do your best to establish a place, a time, and a routine of private prayer. If you can, go to the same place, at the same time, every day.

You don’t have to overdo it, either. Maybe, at first, just try to take 15 minutes and stick with that. Sometimes we get stuck on a prayer treadmill. We go too long without praying; then we feel so guilty we resolve to change and commit ourselves some unrealistic goal. Then, when we fail to meet the goal, we give up and feel guilty again, and the cycle continues. Pretty soon we resent prayer altogether because it just makes us feel guilty! We need to establish a habit in our life of private prayer, and it helps to be realistic, especially as you begin this practice.

Slow down and get focused: The second suggestion is to slow down and get focused. These two things belong together. Two weeks ago, we talked about the practice of slowing, and this applies to all the rest of the spiritual practices. Take a moment to take a few deep breaths and center your mind and heart on coming into the presence of God. Lay all your distractions at his feet. Francis Chan once said, “My biggest concern for this generation is your inability to focus, especially in prayer.” So it helps to pause. Sometimes a bit of Scripture will help me slow down and focus. Sometimes it helps me to get started with a set prayer. Some people use what’s been called the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Prayer what’s on your heart: The third thing is to just pray about what’s on your heart. Don’t pray about what you think *should* be on your heart, but about what’s really there. Sometimes our minds wander in prayer. We catch ourselves and try to get back to praying, but perhaps your mind has wandered there for a reason. Maybe your mind wanders to a conversation, which went in the wrong direction, and you find yourself replaying it in your head. Pay attention to that. Maybe you should bring it right into the presence of God. Maybe even the Holy Spirit has led your mind to wander in that direction! C.S. Lewis said, “We

must lay before him what is in us, not what ought to be in us." Don't worry, as you mature in prayer; God will lead you to pray about things that matter most to him. One thing to add here is be specific with God about your needs and requests. I think we're far too bashful in prayer in telling God what we need.

Keep it fresh: The next thing is to keep it fresh. Have times in prayer where you break out of your routine. Like a married couple needs to get away once in a while to renew their relationship, we need to do the same with God. Maybe take a half-day retreat. Maybe it helps you to get out in God's creation and pray as you walk. I call these *Emmaus Walks* because it was on the road to Emmaus the two disciples walked and talked with Jesus. It was then he spoke to them through the Scriptures and revealed himself to them when they broke bread. A long walk can be a great opportunity for prayer.

Take it into the day: The fifth thing is to take it into the day. Prayer isn't just for your closet; it is for all of life. That's why we're told to pray without ceasing. I love the example of Nehemiah. He had to make a difficult request to his employer, who happened to be the King of Persia. He was waiting for just the right time, and it came when the king asked him why he seemed so burdened. In the split second before he spoke, Nehemiah writes, **"Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the King..."** (Nehemiah 2:4). Have you ever done that? You shoot a quick prayer to God right at a critical moment. That's part of what it means to take it into the day.

Pray in community: The last suggestion is to learn to pray in community. It's important to pray in secret, and throughout the day, but also with your brothers and sisters in Christ. This takes place in several contexts.

- It takes place when we come to church and worship. Worship in and of itself is a form of prayer. In worship, we respond to God with words of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.

- It also takes place in our small groups. Small groups are a place where we open up and share with others what's going on in our lives, partly so we can pray for one another.
- Finally, prayer in community takes place in families. Do you pray as a family? Do you pray as a married couple? If you're parents, do you pray with your kids? Are you teaching them how to pray? Would they ever watch your prayer life and be so intrigued they'd come to you and ask, "Mom, Dad, will you teach me to pray?"

When you come to the Father in prayer, let him minister to you, and remember—you have the ear of God!

Father, we worship you as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Jesus, we worship you today as the Lord and Savior of the World. Holy Spirit, we worship you today as the Comforter and Sanctifier of the people of God. Glory be the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

Father, we pray that we'd trust you as our Father and live in your presence and please you more and more. We say, "Yes" to your invitation to pray. Lord Jesus, we pray we'd trust you as our Savior, take up our cross, and follow you. Holy Spirit, we pray we'd trust you as our Sanctifier, and you'd fill us with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in our lives.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we surrender to You. We open all the secret places in our heart to you. We hold nothing back: our health, our family, our resources, our job, our relationships, our successes and failures. We release them and surrender our understanding of how we think things ought to be.

Lord, we surrender everything to You, the past, the present, and the future. In sickness and in health, in life and in death, I belong to You.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.