SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Before Anything Else

Jarrett Stephens

Pray Like Jesus | August 16, 2026 | Mark 1:35; Luke 3:21-22; Hebrews 5:7; Luke 5:16; Luke 6:12-13; Mark 6:46; John 15

Prepared from the spoken message and lightly edited for readability. Scripture quotations and spoken phrasing are preserved as delivered.

Let's take our Bibles and turn to Luke chapter 3. We're going to look at a bunch of different Scripture passages this morning. All of those that we look at will be on the screen for you.

As we begin this fall kickoff, I'm very excited about this fall as a church. I want to encourage you: bring your Bibles on Sunday morning when you come in. Bring a journal, a notebook. Take notes. It'll help you engage with the message, and you can recall what's going on, maybe in your own time alone with the Lord during the week. All of the messages we preach from, the manuscript that I preach from, are uploaded on Monday or Tuesday. You can go to our website and get those notes there. It'll help you as we start off the fall.

You're looking around, and you might see some people in some jerseys. Our children's ministry, our student ministry, adult ministry - even some of them are in the game on this fall kickoff. At 8 o'clock, we had somebody in here with a Cowboys jersey on, and we exercised church discipline after the service. It was an interesting time.

Now we're all in on this fall kickoff, and it is going to be an incredible fall. I'm so looking forward to all that God is going to do. It, of course, starts today with our children and our teenagers, their life groups, and their aging up.

Then I want to invite you this Wednesday - put this on your calendar - to our Night of Prayer and Praise. We do this twice a year, where we kick off the two semesters, if you will, January and August, with just a night of corporate praise and worship. This Wednesday at 6:45, right here in this room, it's going to be very special because we have a number of our members and former residents that we're commissioning. They're going to be serving all over the world, and so it'll be a special night for them.

We've got a great group of new deacons that we're going to be ordaining and laying hands on, and that'll be a special moment in that service, as well as some new ministers that we're ordaining. This is a significant thing for us as a church, and I just want to encourage you, if at all possible, to be back on Wednesday night. Let's fill this place up with prayer and praise and worship and support these men and women as we commission them and ordain them. It is going to be a great night together.

Then later on in the fall, we've got the Resilience Conference coming up. You're going to hear more and more about this. This is a three- or four-day conference, and it'll have breakout sessions and worship sessions during the day, and then we'll have a huge session at night. Shane and Shane will be here leading us in worship. It's just a conference centered on prayer and praise and worship, and that's what this fall is all about.

My goal and my hope for our church this fall, and for you as an individual, is that you can look back on these months that make up the fall of 2026 and say, "You know what? That was the greatest time of spiritual growth in my life that I've ever experienced." That's what we're trying to do. We're trying to turn the spiritual temperature up a little bit.

All of the fall is about seeking the presence of God, being in His presence, and growing in intimacy with Him. That's what this new series that we're introducing today is all about. The series is called Pray Like Jesus. If we're going to grow in our relationship with the Lord, who better to learn from and who better to emulate than Jesus Himself?

We know that Jesus came to accomplish and secure our salvation. Jesus left the confines of heaven, wrapped Himself in flesh - God in the flesh. He lived a perfect life. He died as a sacrifice, as a substitute on our behalf, and shed His blood for us. The Bible teaches that He died, He was buried, and three days later He was raised to life, signifying that He was the Son of God. In that death, burial, and resurrection, He accomplished and secured our salvation. This is why Jesus came, no doubt about it.

But He also came to live as an example for us. When we read Scripture, and specifically when we read the Gospels, we see the way that Jesus interacted with people. We see the way that He made decisions and the way He spent His time, and it's all there so that we could learn to follow in His steps. His example teaches us.

Most of the students here went back to school this week, and all the parents said, "Amen." And all the students said, "Oh me," right? Golly, why is this?

These students go to school, and they have a classroom that they're sitting in. Whatever subject they're being taught, that instructor, that teacher, is up there. If it's math, they're helping them work out those math problems. If it's English, they're diagramming sentences. If it's biology, they're working to understand the periodic table.

Well, when it comes to prayer and growing in our relationship with the Lord, it's very important that we enter the classroom with the master instructor, Jesus Himself.

As I've been studying for this series, there's a Christian classic out there by the name of *With Christ in the School of Prayer*. It's written by a minister and missionary from South Africa in the mid-1800s, Andrew Murray. Read any of his books. *Surrender*, which he wrote, is also a classic. It's all about a call to holiness. It's all about devotion to Christ. His books are all about prayer.

In this book, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, listen to what he says: "Though in its beginnings prayer is so simple that the feeblest child can pray, it is at the same time the highest and holiest work to which man can rise."

With Christ in the school of prayer - that's the idea. That's the driving force behind this series. And so I say for the next seven weeks, we enroll in the class of prayer and let Jesus, the model instructor, the model teacher, teach us through His prayer what it is and what it's all about.

Depending on how you count, Jesus is shown in the Gospels praying around 25 times. He prays for a bunch of

different things. He prays prayers of intercession. He prays prayers of praise and blessing and provision. We see Him praying in good times. We see Him praying in not-so-good times - the Garden of Gethsemane, on the cross.

Twenty-five times we read of Jesus praying in the Gospels. But of those 25 times, get this, depending on how you count, only eight or nine of the 25 times we see Jesus praying do we have the actual words that Jesus prayed. That means most of what we know about the prayer life of Jesus is not what He prayed; it's that He prayed.

With this being the introduction to the message series and the message today, let's get after it. I'm titling the sermon today "Before Anything Else."

I want to give you the big idea, the sermon in a sentence. It'll be on the screen for you: For Jesus, prayer wasn't a box to check. It was a life to share.

I want you to think about this. We would never say this out loud, but I think it's true, and I think most of us would affirm this. When we think of prayer, the majority of the time, we think of prayer as a duty, do we not? It's something that we put on the to-do list. It's a box that we check.

We know God calls us to pray and commands us to pray. We know we should pray. It's actually one of the ways, when we think about our spiritual health, that we gauge our spiritual health. If we're praying, then we think, "Okay, we're doing pretty good, spiritually speaking." If we're not praying, well, then something's off. Just like that, prayer becomes less about a relationship and more of a box to check.

Jesus never viewed prayer in this way. He saw prayer as a life to share with His Father. As we look at the life of Jesus today, specifically His prayer life, we'll see that prayer wasn't the discipline behind His ministry. It was the source from which all ministry flowed.

The first time we see Jesus praying is in Luke's Gospel. Interestingly enough, Luke says more about the prayer life of Jesus than any other Gospel that we have. He had a unique interest in the prayer life of Jesus. In fact, of the 84 times that the verb "to pray" is mentioned in the Bible, Luke records 34 of those times in either his Gospel, the Gospel of Luke, or the Acts of the Apostles, which he also wrote.

We see this idea of Jesus praying first and foremost in Luke chapter 3. Look at verses 21 and 22:

> *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened,*
>
> *and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."*
>
> — Luke 3:21-22

Before Ministry, Jesus Prayed

The message is "Before Anything Else," and if you're taking notes, here's the first point. Write it down: Before ministry, Jesus prayed.

I've read about the baptism of Jesus for as long as I can remember, and I always thought that when Jesus was baptized, that's when the dove descended, and that's when the voice of the Father came affirming His Son: "This is My Son, whom I love, and with whom I am well pleased." I can remember looking at early Christian art, and it shows Jesus coming out of the water and the dove descending.

But that's not how Luke records it. He's very specific. Verse 21 says Jesus had been baptized. That's a completed action. The ongoing action is in the words "He was praying." It's a present participle. In other words, the Holy Spirit comes down and the voice of the Father affirms the Son not as a result of Jesus being baptized, but as a response to Jesus praying.

I want us to take this to heart this morning. Before Jesus began His public ministry, before He ever preached one sermon, before He ever healed one person, before He ever called one disciple, Jesus prayed.

We'll see this is the regular, normal routine and rhythm of His life. It's just what He did in the midst of some crazy, busy days of ministry. He'd be healing people all day long. Before ministry, He prayed.

By the way, ministry just means "to serve." So we could say, church, before our acts of service, we pray. That's the model of Jesus. Again, for Jesus, prayer wasn't a box to check; it was a life to share. He prayed.

Before Decisions, Jesus Prayed

Secondly, before decisions, Jesus prayed. Look at Luke chapter 6, verses 12 and 13:

> *In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.*
>
> *And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles.*
>
> — Luke 6:12-13

I would say that decision - whom Jesus chose to call as His posse, if you will, His disciples, the ones who were going to follow Him - was a pretty big decision. Scripture underscores that it was so important that He continued all night in prayer to God.

That's something to think about. If we're going to emulate the prayer of Jesus, before making decisions - I would say big decisions and small decisions - we better pray. That's what prayer is. It's sharing life with God.

Don't we want God's perspective? Don't we want His wisdom in making decisions? So before we proceed in this relationship, we pray. Before we take that new job, we pray. As we determine how to interact with that difficult person at the office, we pray. This is the Jesus way. Before making decisions, big or small, Jesus prayed.

Before the Day, Jesus Prayed

Thirdly, and this is where we'll spend most of our time, before the day, Jesus prayed. Listen to Mark chapter 1, verse 35:

> *And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.*
>
> — Mark 1:35

He went out. He got alone. Again, this is a regular routine. It was the regular rhythm of His life. Whenever He could break away and be by Himself and share in life with the Father, that is what He did.

We see Him doing it at the start of His day. We see Him doing it at the close of His day. Luke chapter 5, verse 16 says:

> *But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.*
>
> — Luke 5:16

This was the routine of His life. This is not a single withdrawal here. You dive into the word structure of the original language, and the grammar signals an ongoing, habitual, repeated action. This is not just what Jesus did. It was who He was.

He would continually, time after time after time after time, withdraw, get alone, and be with His Father. Prayer was not a box to check; it was a life to share. He would do it over and over and over and over again.

When we have a habit of doing something, those things become a part of our identity, don't they? It's one thing to say, "I like fishing, and I fish." It's another thing to invest money in it and do it all the time. What do we say about that person? That person's a fisherman, right?

Same with golf. You might like to golf, but if you're doing it three days a week, that's a golfer, like me.

I've told you before, if I run, I feel like you should know about it. So I run Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Whether I feel like it, whether I want to, I'm going out to run. You know what that makes me? A runner, thank you very much. Because this habit marks my life. It's not just what I do; it's who I am.

Well, this is what's happening in Luke chapter 5. Jesus withdraws to desolate places by Himself to pray so often, so habitually, that again, it's not something He did; it is just who He was. He was a pray-er.

The question becomes: Does this describe your life? Is it so much a part of who you are that you could be described as a pray-er?

Hebrews chapter 5 describes the prayer life of Jesus. Listen to what it says:

> *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.*
>
> — Hebrews 5:7

Amazing. Can you imagine hearing Jesus pray? What must that have been like?

I'm telling you, He wasn't checking off a box. You don't pray with loud cries and tears while checking off a box. No, He was sharing life with His Father. He was authentic. He was real. It was genuine.

Does this describe your prayer life?

If we're going to pray like Jesus, this means that we begin sharing life with our Father. To do this, we do it before we do anything for Him - before ministry. We do it before we make decisions, big or small. We don't just jump the gun and do what we want to do. No, we pray. We seek Him. We share in life with Him.

We do it before the day starts and continue to break away as much as we can. It is a rhythm and routine in our life. When we do this, here's the thing: We will find ourselves more at peace internally. We will see that we're experiencing more joy. We'll have a greater inner strength. And just like Jesus, power will be manifested in our lives in a visible way because we continue to withdraw and be with our Father in the secret place.

Enemies of Intimacy

I need to point this out very quickly. I think all of us know this, but if this fall is going to be the greatest year of spiritual growth for us, if we're going to seek His face, seek to be in His presence, linger longer with Him, and get to know Him in a more intimate way, I can promise you this: We have an enemy who does not want that.

Satan, the devil, knows that when we get alone with the Father, that's where our peace grows. He knows that's where joy is fostered, and he doesn't want that. He knows that's where strength comes from and power comes from, and so Satan's going to do anything he can to prevent us from withdrawing like Jesus and making it the pattern of our lives. He's going to do anything he can to prevent it.

When I was writing my first book, *The Mountains Are Calling*, I surveyed various mountains in Scripture. One of the mountains I wrote about is an entire chapter. I called it "Mount Desolate," and it was about these mountains, specifically in Luke's Gospel, though Mark mentions them as well. It's about this pattern in Jesus' life that He would get to a mountain, to a desolate place, a lonely place, and He would seek to spend time with His Father.

I write in that chapter about what I call enemies of intimacy. There are three of them. See if you can identify with any of these enemies of intimacy. These are what Satan's going to use to try to prevent you from moving forward in your prayer life. He's going to try to stop you from sharing life with the Father.

Busyness

The first thing is busyness. Tell me that ain't true, right? What's the saying? "If Satan can't make you bad, he'll make you busy." That's what he does.

We can be busy doing good things, church activities. We can be in ministry and not share in life with the Father.

I see these parents of young families. I remember when our kids were in those toddler stages, and I just remember thinking, "Dear Lord, when they can brush their teeth by themselves and get themselves dressed, it's going to be a game changer for me. I'm going to have so much more time."

But you know what? That ain't true. Something else fills that time.

This past Wednesday, we introduced our new residents. Last week, we had a resident orientation for them, and we ended the night in a prayer gathering and a worship gathering at the Lanier Chapel. I was with the residents, and I was just thinking, "Man, I remember when I was in that stage of life, working, going to school, staying up all night writing papers, and reading books I had no interest in because the professor assigned them and I had to."

I just remember thinking, "When I get this degree, oh my goodness, I cannot wait to get out of school. I'm going to have so much more time on my hands."

You know why you're laughing? Because you know there's no more time on our hands. It just gets filled.

This is what busyness does. It's an enemy of intimacy. What Satan wants to do is get us overextended, burning the candle at both ends, running around like a chicken with our head cut off. He wants us to overcommit and rush from one place to the next because he knows that if he can make us busy, we can't share in life with the Father. It's not going to happen. Busyness is an enemy of intimacy.

Complacency

What about complacency? Isn't it amazing? I talk about this a lot. It's amazing how passionate we are about hobbies and interests.

I'm not downing it. We should be passionate about hobbies and interests. We ought to enjoy having a good time. But it's just amazing, and it's telling, how much time we spend on hobbies and interests.

Fantasy football is here, and I know people who are buying magazines and subscriptions so they can strategize and win their fantasy football league.

In our house right now, it's mahjong. Have you ever heard of this? It's a conspiracy, is what it is. They spend all sorts of money and time on these games.

It's all good. You ought to have hobbies. You ought to have interests. I went to the Texans preseason game this past week, and you know how they show the camera and put people on the big screen? People lose their minds when they're on the big screen. But they showed this guy on the big screen. I found a clean image of him. I mean, look at this guy. Are you kidding me? That's called passionate.

Think about the money we spend, the time we give, and the devotion that we put into these hobbies and interests, into work and play. Again, it's not bad, but it's telling because when it comes to spiritual things, when it comes to our spiritual appetite and our desire to know God and grow in our relationship with Him, we get so apathetic and so complacent.

Tozer said, "Complacency is the deadly foe of all spiritual growth."

What he's saying is this: We can come in here, and I can give you a list of things to do to increase intimacy with the Lord. I can give you one thing to do to ensure that you don't grow in intimacy with the Lord: Just do nothing. Be complacent and apathetic from a spiritual standpoint. It's an enemy of intimacy.

Self-Sufficiency

Number three: self-sufficiency.

We see this often in the Gospels. Jesus would perform a miracle, and He would say, "Don't tell anybody about that. It's not My time," because He knew what people would do. They'd want to make Him king, want to make Him Lord.

We see it at the feeding of the five thousand. He feeds all those people a Hebrew Happy Meal, man, out of a couple of fish and bread. Everybody gets full, and they're full to where they're completely satisfied. They want to make Him Lord, and you know what He does? He breaks away.

Mark's Gospel puts it like this:

> *And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray.*
> — Mark 6:46

He sends off the crowd. He sends off the disciples. He went up on a mountain to pray.

The temptation for all of us is to think we can handle life on our own. "I got this." Sometimes it doesn't even come out of a bad place. It's like, "I'm not going to bother God with this. It's not that big of a deal. I can handle it. I'm smart enough, capable enough, wise enough. I can figure this out."

Rather than drawing near to the Lord, what happens? Our pride and self-sufficiency take over. We think we can do this on our own. In doing so, we are actually failing to grow in intimacy with the Lord and to share in life with the Father because, "Well, this isn't a major emergency. I got this. I'm not going to bother Him with this."

But really, that's just pride. It's this idea of self-sufficiency.

Are you identifying with any of these enemies - busyness, complacency, or self-sufficiency? I promise you, if you want to make this a great semester of spiritual growth, make the decision: "I'm going to withdraw. I'm going to be alone with the Father." Then watch the enemy come at you with all of these enemies.

Sharing Life With the Father

What do we do? I want to give you two points of action as we bring this message to a close. How do we engage and fight against these enemies of intimacy? How can we make sure that we are sharing life with the Father?

Get a Routine

Number one: Get a routine.

Listen to me. Routine and rhythm, spiritually speaking, are your friends. Get a routine, or disaster awaits.

When my oldest, Riley, was about two years old, Debbie and I were just kids parenting kids. We didn't know what we were doing, but we had read all the books. We had Riley on a routine. She went to bed at the same

time. She ate at the same time.

Now, by the time number three and number four came along, they could eat off the floor and sleep on the floor. We didn't care. But number one, man, we had a plan in place, right?

What does Mike Tyson say? "Everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the mouth." Well, we had a plan in place, and we had Riley in a routine.

One night we were traveling. We were starving and hadn't eaten dinner. It was past Riley's bedtime, and we thought, "Man, we've got to eat." So we pulled into this restaurant. "Surely she'll be fine. We've got her baby blanket. We've got her stuffed animals. We've got 17 pacifiers." You lose those things, so we were ready to go.

We went into the restaurant. It took a minute to get seated, and we finally sat down. I put little Riley in her high chair, and we weren't five minutes into sitting at the table when, all of a sudden, my sweet little two-year-old turned into a monster right there at the table.

I mean, yelling, screaming, inconsolable. You've been in these situations, parents. You know what I'm talking about. You can sense every person in the restaurant looking at you. It starts getting really hot. You know it's bad when the manager comes over and offers assistance: "Is there anything we can do?"

I remember getting Riley up. I'm lying, I'm dying. I took her into the restroom, and I was trying to talk sense into a two-year-old. We were both out of our routine and out of our minds. Logic wasn't happening. "You can't act like this. It's not right."

Well, if routine is important for a toddler, I'm telling you it's important for me and you, spiritually speaking. I can't emphasize this highly enough: Get a routine in meeting with the Lord.

Find a place to meet with God. Remember Andrew Murray from earlier, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*? Listen to what he says about finding a place to meet with God: "Jesus wants each one to choose for himself a fixed spot where he can meet Him daily. That inner chamber, that solitary place, is Jesus' schoolroom. That spot can be anywhere. It can even change from day to day if we're traveling. But that secret place must be somewhere with quiet time for the pupil to place himself in the Master's presence."

I love that. We have a fixed spot where we enter the classroom with Jesus. "Jesus, I'm the pupil. You're the Master. Teach me today."

Get a routine. Get a Bible reading plan. Get a notebook. Get a pen. Record what you're reading. Write down the verse. Write out your prayers. When you're reading and that verse pops off the page and into your heart, write it down. Give God your requests.

The most important thing is, don't complicate the time. Just spend time alone with the Lord. Make it a priority. Get into a routine.

Prayer and quiet time are actually called disciplines. They're called disciplines for a reason. But remember, it's not a box to check. It's a life to share. When we have the discipline of being in a routine, watch this: That discipline becomes a delight. But it only happens if you have the routine, if you have the rhythm.

So get a routine. It's going to be different for maybe everybody in the room, but you need to set a time, set a place, and have a plan for meeting with God.

Get Alone

Secondly, get alone. This means limit distractions. Silence the noise.

In studying this week, I read a statistic that the average American checks their phone within 10 minutes of waking up. I just want you to think about that. I'm not talking about checking it for the alarm or the time. I'm talking about engaging with news or social media, returning a text, or looking at email within the first 10 minutes of waking up.

Do you know what that does to your mind and heart? It clouds it. You can't listen to God. You've got too many voices coming in already.

You've got to get alone. Listen, we talked about prayer as sharing life with the Father, but prayer is a two-way street. It's also the Father sharing life with us. He wants to infuse Himself, His Word, His Spirit, and His strength into us. This is why John 15 calls for us to abide, to remain.

It's us sharing our life with the Father, but it's also the Father sharing with us. It's incredibly hard to hear from someone when we're not alone and when we're distracted.

You want to hear from God? You want Him to speak to you and share life with you? You've got to get alone. It's so important.

I was running this week. Did I tell you I was a runner? I was running this week and thinking about this message. I was just thinking about the importance of prayer and time alone with the Lord. Why is it so important?

Well, one, the Father cares for us. I was typing this into my phone as I was running. The Father cares for us. That's why we pray. God cares about you. He loves you. What you're going through, needs big or small - they're all small to God. He loves you. That's one reason we pray.

Secondly, we pray because we need His strength. We need His power for the day.

The third reason we pray is that the people you live with, work with, and go to school with need you to spend time with God, right?

Listen, me, in and of myself, on my best day, can't do anything of eternal value in your heart and life. What you need from me on a Sunday morning is not me. You need God in me. What your spouse needs is God in you.

Spending time sharing life with the Father changes everything. If this semester is going to be the greatest year of spiritual growth we've ever experienced, we've got to get a routine, and we've got to get alone. We've got to prioritize what Jesus prioritized.

This is the only way we'll pray like Jesus. Just remember, as we do, for Jesus, prayer was not a box to check. It was a life to share.

Amen? Let's pray together. Heads are bowed.