

2012 FOCUS 40
40 Days of Prayer and Fasting

Ten Sermons on Evangelism and Prayer

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When Faith Goes Viral!

By Rev. Steve Chiles

In 1949, a man by the name of John Courier was convicted of murder. He was sentenced to life in prison and served a number of years back East and then eventually was transferred to a farm near Nashville, Tennessee. In 1968, nineteen years later, his sentence was terminated and he was set free. There was a problem, however. No one told John. For the next ten years, he continued to do his job on a work farm outside of Nashville, and it wasn't until 1978 that a deputy warden who happened to be visiting thought he remembered seeing John's paperwork come through. Sure enough, he came back and gave John his release. John was set free, only ten years late.

A little survey: How many of you, if you had been John, would have been a little bit upset? I cannot think of anything more frustrating or aggravating than the knowledge that you had been set free yet had never been given that message. Hold that thought. I wonder if there might be a day when there will be people in our culture who will feel that way toward us. The fact of the matter is, Jesus Christ came from heaven to earth to set humankind free. He died on the cross so that our sins would be forgiven. He paid a penalty that not one of us could pay. When he died on the cross and said, "It is finished," that was a worldwide proclamation. But the responsibility now falls upon *us* to let this world know that they have been set free through Jesus Christ. If they will only accept him as their Savior and Lord, that freedom is theirs. But there is a problem. It is the greatest story that is never told.

Today, what I want to zero in on is that there is something the first-century church had that we need to recapture. It was the passionate commitment of being missional. When they got the Great Commission word from Jesus, they believed with all their hearts that their primary reason for being here on earth was to go make disciples. We have to recapture that. When you look at this in the book of Acts, you see that the faith of the disciples, in today's terminology, went "viral." This happens when something catches fire on the Internet and spreads rapidly, often via YouTube. Someone will capture a scene on camera, and before you know it, fifty million people have seen it. That's what's known as going viral. That's what happened with the disciples. The faith of these few went viral and began to spread everywhere.

Let's go back to the book of Acts and what was happening in their going viral with the whole idea of Jesus Christ redeeming the world.

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the

favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:38–47 NIV)

Daily? People were getting saved daily! That's the church going viral!

We believe one of the primary reasons the church exists is for those who are not yet a part of it. The main reason Christ left us on earth is there are lost people who need to be found. But when does that happen in a significant way? When does it become viral? Almost every Christian church *thinks* evangelism is one of their primary goals. Yet across the United States, 80 to 85 percent of all churches have plateaued or are declining. When you interview people, the surveys have said that only 2 percent of the people who claim to be Christians have ever led anyone to Christ. That's not being viral.

Let's rethink how we can make that happen. If we are going to change the world, how are we to go viral with this mission of reclaiming this lost world for Jesus Christ? Let me give you three thoughts.

The Church Becomes Viral When Faith Promotion Becomes Personal!

First of all, faith promotion has got to become personal. We'll go viral as a church when faith promotion—teaching the gospel—becomes personal. What do I mean by that?

It means we take personal responsibility. When you walk into most churches and talk to them about reaching their community for Jesus Christ, most of the time people want to talk about evangelistic programs or evangelistic events. If you don't hear anything else, hear this. Reaching this world for Jesus Christ is not a program. It's a personal responsibility! It's not a program or event. We do programs and events, and they are wonderful for what they do. But Jesus never said, "Go hold an event." He didn't say, "Go start a program." He said, "Go make disciples. Go make disciples!"

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NIV).

Every one of us has people in our world who are lost without God. They may be in our home, our neighborhood, our work place, or our stores. They just may be people we run into on some regular or semi-regular basis. Every one of us has people around us who are lost and dying without God. What we have to understand is that we don't need another new program to reach them. We just need to take *personal* responsibility for reaching them.

A sociological study was done in which someone who seemed to be hurt or in need was placed at a particular location. What they discovered is that the larger the group of people, the longer it took anyone to help the person. The mentality is that the larger the group of people, the more people seem to think that *someone else* will do it, so they don't have to. Let's just agree that is the nature of the church. We all agree somebody ought to do something to reach the lost community for Christ. That somebody is *us!*

We need to talk about faith promotion through our personal story. This ought to be the most freeing thing I say to you. When we talk about reaching our world for Christ, people often say they don't know what to say to people. "What if I say the wrong thing?" "What if they ask me questions that I can't answer?" Those of us who have kids know that at times we all have questions we can't answer! It's a

part of life. More than your theology, more than your perfect answers, what people really need to hear is *what god has done for you!* God has done something for all of us. He has given us wisdom when we needed it. He has answered prayer when we've cried out to him. We have known in our personal life what it's like to be lost and we are now found. You have a story! Your story doesn't have to be dramatic or unbelievable. It could be as simple as just realizing one day how much God loved you and so you made that commitment to him.

Whatever your story is, it's *your* story. I promise you that every single day of your life you come into contact with people who need to know that their lives will change, who need to know God still answers prayer, who need to know there is still hope. So much more than us trying to find nice theological framework to work within, more than anything else people want to know if he has done that for you. The most powerful thing you can say to someone is, "I have been where you are and God helped me. If God can help me, he can help you." Jesus didn't say to the demoniac, "Go home and teach a class on theology." He said: "Go home to your family *and tell them how much the Lord has done for you*, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19 NIV, emphasis added).

People need a personal invitation. We put up banners at times to attract people driving by. We have done mailings. We do lots of kinds of advertising to let the community know who we are and what we're doing. But in spite of all this, we can never forget this fact: 75 to 90 percent of the people who come to Christ and to his church come because a friend, relative, or neighbor invited them. That's what you see in the first-century church. You see a group of people who took personal responsibility. They shared their personal stories. They gave out invitations. "Come and hear what I heard." "Come discover what I have discovered!"

"The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus" (John 1:41–42 NIV).

I want to challenge us to be a group of people who take personal responsibility. We will do everything we can to make this easy as possible for you by providing invitation cards and targeting particularly opportune times for you invite others. But *you* have to do the asking! Do you know how easy it is to transform this city? If we had three hundred adults here at Shartel, and every one of us decided to win one person to Christ, and we were successful, we'd have six hundred. And if we did that again each year, do you know how long it would take to transform the entire city of Oklahoma City? Only seven years! Let's take responsibility and let's take our city for Christ!!

Let me give you a second feature of the first-century church.

We Go Viral When Our Lives Become Irresistibly Attractive!

How many of you got up this morning, looked in the mirror, and said, "I am irresistibly attractive"? It might not have been your first thought if you look like me with seven hairs all going a different direction. But that's the kind of lives that Christ is asking us to cultivate! Because that's the kind of life that makes people want what we have!! When you look at this story from Acts 2, when people were looking at these Christ-followers, there was something so magnetic about who they were that others just couldn't help being drawn in. Sometimes, even in our zeal to reach others for Christ, we are not attractive in the way we do it.

I read a story this week about a Methodist preacher in England. He was talking about one of his zealous members who wanted to share Christ but didn't have good social skills. He said the guy was working as a barber. One day, with a guy in his shop for a shave, he got a guy all lathered up in his chair and was slapping the razor around and tilted the guy's head back and asked, "Are you ready to meet the Lord?" The customer went running out of the shop with lather on his face. That's not necessarily the best approach to it. What if, in addition to being willing to share our faith verbally, we looked at our lives and asked, "How can we cultivate *the way we live* to communicate our faith?" What if we decided that we were going to be uncommonly friendly? Particularly when they walked in our doors of our church? What if we decided that we were going to be uncommonly kind? Did you read what the first-century church was doing? The Bible says that they were selling their own stuff so they could help people in need! They were sacrificing things themselves to take care of people around them. They were doing things that were so uncommonly nice that people were drawn to them like moths to the light!

I have discovered that people are always caught off guard when you are nice. I try to make myself do acts of kindness as a personal discipline. I love to go into 7-Eleven or Circle K and try to catch somebody who is also getting coffee and when they get to the counter, I say "Coffee's on me today." They always look at me as if I am selling something. I tell them, "Everyone deserves a day when someone buys their coffee." It's a simple gesture and only costs me a buck, but most people are incredibly moved and grateful. I remember when I was in Phoenix, there was a Circle K I used to stop at on Sundays on my way to church fairly frequently and often bought coffee for other customers. One day I was in there through the week and the manager stopped me and said, "Who are you?" I smiled and said, "My wife doesn't allow me to give out that information to strange women." She laughed and said, "No. What do you do?" I smiled again and said, "I'm a pastor." She turned and said to the girl beside her, "See, I told you he had to be somebody special. You're always so nice to people here." It's not hard to be nice. It's just allowing the Jesus who is in us to come out. People who are uncommonly kind make people want to know what makes them tick.

A third piece of this is the whole idea of being attractive is being passionate about our love for God. That's particularly true in the way we worship. Often, when you look at the faces of people worshiping in church you'd think they didn't believe a word of what they were singing! An expression you hear a lot about churches that are growing and reaching people is that their worship is *alive*. And it should be! Our God is alive! Ghandi once noted that if one-tenth of what we say is true, we ought to be ten times more excited than we are! In Acts 2, the Bible says they met together with glad and sincere hearts, *worshiping the Lord and gaining the favor of all the people*. I think that there ought to be something so attractive about how friendly, kind, and passionate we are about God that people look at us and say, "I want some of that."

We Become Viral When We Are Motivated by a Sense of Urgency

When you go back to Acts, you discover something interesting: They really believed Jesus was coming back! And they believed he was coming any day. You see, if you really believe he is coming any day, maybe today, there is a little adrenaline pumping in you and you become more concerned with what you are doing. They also believed that people really were lost without Christ, and they really believed that people who died without Jesus were going to be separated from God forever. They believed there was a hell and that there were people who were going to go there. It was a *reality* for them. When you really believe it, it gives you a greater sense of urgency. We know Jesus is

coming back and that people are lost on a mental level, but we don't experience it on an emotional level. It's a part of our theology but not a part of our everyday *reality*.

Did you remember the miners in Chile and the day the rescuers broke through to where they were? They had been buried underground for two months. Then finally, the rescuers broke through. Here's what hit me as I was reading that story that day. I thought, "That's really cool. They finally reached those guys." All of a sudden it hit me. What if it had been my son down there? What if it had been my brother or my grandson buried a mile underground? How would I feel then? If that was someone close to me, I would have been out there digging with my own hands for two months! And when we broke through, I would have been dancing and shouting and crying with joy! Somewhere on this journey, this stuff we do has to be more than just great theological truth that would be nice if fulfilled. If it's going to go viral, it's going to have to find a way to permeate our hearts on a deep emotional level so we become filled with the sense of urgency for these people who we love who are buried underground. It's got to be so personal to us and we have to be so passionate about it that we are driven to our knees, crying out to God with unceasing prayer. We have to believe again, really believe, that Jesus *is* coming back and that those we love really *are* lost without him.

It was September 1985 in New Orleans and the city recreation department was holding an end-of-summer party. There were two hundred people there. One hundred of them were certified lifeguards from around the city, and four lifeguards were actually on duty. They were having a great time, and they were celebrating that it was the first summer they'd had without a drowning. They partied for a good while and then as the people began to leave and the lifeguards began to clear out the crowds the unthinkable happened. They found a 31-year-old named Jerome Moody in the pool who had drowned while at the party. One hundred certified lifeguards were there! Four were actually on duty! Yet they were so caught up in the celebration of their own success that they failed to fulfill their very purpose—to save lives. Let's not let that be us!

I love what God is doing here at our church. I love our excitement, our enthusiasm. And I love you personally. I can't think of anywhere else in the world I would rather be or any other group I would rather grow old with. But as we celebrate our chance to be together and to share our lives and faith together, let's not forget the primary reason we are here: There are people all around us who are drowning without God! People who won't be reached if we don't reach them.

"They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven'" (Acts 1:10–11 NIV).

The clock is ticking and Jesus will be coming again. Let's not get caught staring into the sky. Let's get about the work he's called us to do to go make disciples. Let's take our faith and make it viral!

Insights Into the Heart of God

Luke 15:1–32

By Dr. Randall Spence

The nightmare began with a knock at the door. It was a knock that would change our lives forever.

Think about the many kinds of knocks that have come to your door. Many of them are welcome, such as the knock of a loved one or friend. Then there's the unsolicited knock of a salesperson selling his wares. But on occasion there may come a knock that is the worst nightmare of a parent or spouse. It is the knock that says that someone precious to you has died.

Such was the fateful knock on our door in the fall of 1959. I was ten and my brother Larry was five. I was getting ready for school. When the knock came, my mother went immediately to the front door. I followed close behind, curious as to who could be knocking at such an early hour. As my mother opened the door, I peered around her and saw several people from our church, including our pastor and a person or two that I didn't know. On seeing this solemn group gathered on our front porch, my mother grabbed her chest, stepped back, and sank into a chair in the living room. The news we then received would change our lives forever as a family. My father, a thirty-five-year-old over-the-road trucker, had driven off the road and down an embankment. His truck had caught fire and his body burned beyond recognition. They identified him by the serial number on his truck. My mother, a stay-at-home wife and mother, was left a widow at the tender age of thirty-four.

Most of the events of the following days are but a blur to me with only occasional memories. While I have no recollection of it, my mother and some aunts have told me through the years that on occasion I would get lonely for my father. On those occasions, I would go to my mother's room, remove the picture she had of my father that hung over her bed, take it to bed with me, and cry myself to sleep saying, "I want my daddy. I want my daddy." The photo was of my father in military uniform. He was about twenty years of age and serving in Italy during World War II. He was a handsome young man whom my mother was lovingly devoted to for the fifteen years of their marriage.

As I cried myself to sleep with the words, "I want my daddy," what I longed for beyond anything else was for my father to step out of that picture frame and to live with us again. I ached for him to again be in our home and in our lives.

May I suggest today that when the eternal God of creation, who is above and beyond the realms of time and space, decided to send Jesus into our world, that was precisely what he did. In sending Jesus into the world, the eternal God stepped out of the picture frame and came to live with us.

Here is how the Apostle John expresses it in John 1:1–5: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (KJV).

And then in verse 14, John writes words that many biblical scholars have heralded as the key verse of the whole Bible, the one verse that is at the center of the whole gospel message. John writes:

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (KJV).

In sending Jesus God stepped out of the picture frame and lived for thirty-three years in the flesh among us. But why? Why would God do so? For two primary reasons, I believe. *The first was for Jesus to die on the cross to purchase our salvation.* He came into the world to die for you and for me. As John goes on to later express it in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (KJV).

The second reason the God of creation, who is beyond time and space, broke into our realm and became one of us was to reveal to us his heart. God wants us to know him as he knows us, and he wants us to experience the depth of his love for us as his creation. So Jesus came to show us a portrait of God. He even said to Philip in John 14:9 that “anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (NIV).

The primary way that Jesus gave us a portrait of God was through his teaching. And his primary mode of teaching was through story. He would tell these little earthy stories that carried in them some eternal truth. Often Jesus would say, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...,” and then he would launch into one of those stories that were intended to give us a glimpse into the heart of God.

In Luke 15 we find three such stories that are at the center of the gospel message. I would suggest that if you knew nothing but these three stories, you would understand what is at the heart of the gospel message. I want to share these three stories with you today.

If you read Luke 15:1–2, you get the context for Jesus’ three stories: “Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathered around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

The devout religious folks of Jesus’ day believed that God loved the people like them who kept the law but hated those who did not. From their belief system, no “righteous” person would keep company with such. But here was Jesus hanging out with such people, which to them proved that he couldn’t truly be a godly person himself. So it was to correct their thinking and to inform us that Jesus tells these three parables that give us insight into the heart of God. And since these stories were first told before being reduced to words on paper, let me tell them to you today as Jesus told his listeners then:

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, *there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine persons who need no repentance.*” (Luke 15:4–7 ESV, emphasis added)

To reinforce this important message, Jesus goes on to tell a second story in verse 8:

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin I had

lost.’ Just so, I tell you, *there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.* (ESV, emphasis added)

Read the Scriptures and you will discover the only mention ever made to their being rejoicing in heaven is when a sinner repents, when that which was lost is found.

Jesus then goes on to tell the best-known story ever told, a story that encompasses us all. It is the story commonly referred to as the story of the prodigal son, but it is really not about one lost son but about two. As I tell the story, I will digress occasionally to give a bit of commentary that hopefully will add to our understanding of the story.

“There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them.” (Luke 15:11–12 ESV)

Commentary: This was a patriarchal society that, unlike ours, respected age. Parents were to be treated with the utmost respect and honor. So for a son to request his share of the estate before his father’s death would have been the utmost insult and sign of utter disrespect. To do so was like saying to his father, “I wish you were dead.”

In this patriarchal society, this father could have responded in one or both of two ways. First of all, he could have publicly denounced and disowned his son all together. That is, he essentially could have written his son out of the will.

The second thing he could have done would have been to have his son taken to the public square and to have him stoned to death. But instead, much to the horror and surprise of his listeners, Jesus has the father comply with the request of his rebellious son. Jesus continues the story:

“Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.” (vv 13–16 ESV)

Commentary: For a Jewish boy there would have been nothing more despicable than to be assigned the job of feeding pigs (or slopping the hogs, as some of us would put it). One could not sink any lower than to end up in the pigpen slopping the hogs. This too would have shocked the sensibilities of Jesus’ listeners.

Then comes the climatic point in the story, the turning point that gives the story its unexpected conclusion:

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father.” (vv 17–20 ESV)

Commentary: I wonder what it was that caused the young man to finally come to his senses. Max Lucado says that perhaps one day he saw a reflection of himself and saw a shocking image of just how far he had fallen. When he had left home, he was wearing the latest and greatest designer clothes, smelling of the finest cologne that money could buy. He walked with the pride and the strut of the son of a rich man with coin in his pocket, and he thought he had the world by the tail. Finally, he was getting out from under the harsh rules of his father. Finally, he was going to be his own man, doing his own thing as he chose. But life has a way of giving us a reality check and humbling our proud spirits. But as he made his journey home, he walked not with a strut but with his tail tucked between his legs. His designer clothes had been reduced to dirty, smelly rags, and the smell on his body was not that of expensive cologne but that of body sweat and the pig sty. And if you've ever smelled the aromas of a pigsty, you will agree with me that there are few smells more offensive than that. To be reduced to that has a humbling effect on the most prideful among us.

What was it that made the rebellious young man determined to go home? Was it that one day he woke up and realized just how much he loved and missed his father? Or was it because he missed his older brother who still lived at home? No, it was for none of these reasons. It was instead because of his abject sense of need. It was because he had sunk so low, had made such a mess of his life that there was no place to look but up. But isn't that the way it was or has to be with each of us? For those of you who have come to the heavenly Father seeking forgiveness, wasn't it only because you realized what a mess you had made of your life and that you couldn't save yourself? The truth is that left to our own devices, most of us in time will self-destruct. Most of us, if we allow ourselves to follow our natural inclinations and passions, in time will end up in our own version of the pigpen.

This may be where some of us find ourselves today—in some version of the pigsty. The story of some of us may be dotted with broken relationships. I had a lady who has been married and divorced twice say to me some time ago, “I don't trust my heart when it comes to me. I keep making the same mistake over and over again.”

For others it may be that our lives have spiraled downward into an addiction. Alcohol, drugs, pornography. One of the fastest growing addictions among teens today is to prescription drugs that are readily available and that can be easily stolen. Pornography is perhaps the fastest growing addiction and is capturing the souls of many. If left unchecked, in time these things will devour us and we will self-destruct. It's interesting that the same instincts that cause us to want to grow up and to gain our independence are the same instincts that will lead us to destruction if left unchecked.

In the checkout lane of the supermarket the other day I saw one of those magazines that you see in such places. On the cover was Crystal Palin, teenage daughter of Sarah Palin, the former governor of Alaska. Crystal became pregnant out of wedlock. According to the cover, she supposedly said words to the effect that any teenager who ever thought about the consequences of sex would never have sex. The problem is most don't think about consequences but follow their feelings and one day wake up to the realization that every action has a reaction, that every cause has an effect.

The unfortunate reality is that many of us have to find ourselves in the pigpen before we come to our senses, before we seek the Father's forgiveness. If we read on in Jesus' story about the elder son, we see that this was precisely his problem. How do you confess your sins when you feel you're okay? How do you see that you are lost when you've been a good person all these years? Such persons will not be saved and will not find the forgiveness of the Father until they realize that the words of Paul

in Romans 3:23 apply to them: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (ESV). And Romans 3:10 reminds us that “none is righteous, no, not one” (ESV). Paul goes on to remind us in Romans 6:23 of this sobering fact: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (ESV). What we earn for our sin is death, but it is hard for some of us to see that we are sinners lost in our sin because we are good people, and it is hard for good people to see themselves as sinners. In this respect, until and unless we become like the prodigal son and come to our senses and come to an awareness that we are lost in our sin, we cannot and will not be saved.

Jesus continues his story:

“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe [which would have been the father’s own robe] and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand [which would have been a signet ring denoting the authority of the father] and shoes on his feet [designating his status as a son rather than a servant for only servants went barefoot]. And bring the fattened calf and kill it [an extravagant act that was usually reserved for the visit of the governor or some other high dignitary] and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (vv 20–24 ESV)

Commentary: Jesus essentially spat in the faces of the belief system of the Pharisees when he said the father’s heart leaped with compassion at seeing his rebellious son making his way home. It would be an affront to them, for again they believed that God hated the sinners and loved the righteous. But here we get a glimpse of the heart of God, for God is the father in the story who looks at his son not with disdain and with an insistence that the son grovel awhile before forgiving him, but instead offers it before the son can even ask for it.

What the son did not know before that moment was the heart of his father. He did not know the depth and the breath of his father’s love. What he did not know about were the many nights the father sat on the porch looking down the road hoping and praying that his wayward son would come to his senses and return home. The son could not know the many nights that the father, robbed of sleep, would walk the floor praying and hoping that his lost son would come home.

There’s a story that comes out of the later years of the nineteenth century of a young man, who like the prodigal, rebelled in his teen years and ran away from home. He boarded a train and traveled to a distant place, where he lived for many years. Not once had he ever attempted to contact his parents. But in time his heart softened and he longed to see his parents who, if still living, would now be old people. So, he boarded the train once more and made the journey home. He arrived late one evening well after dark and began the journey down the familiar dirt road towards his boyhood home. As he did so a flood of memories cascaded over him. It was in these very streets that he had played kick-the-can and a host of other games with his friends. As he neared the street where his parents had lived, he remembered an old custom his parents had practiced. Whenever a member of the family would be out after dark, his parents would always place a lighted lantern in the front window both to provide light up the path to the door and as a message of “welcome home.”

As he turned the corner and began the walk down the street where he had grown up and where his parents had lived, a knot grew in his throat and his pulse quickened in nervous anticipation. A thousand questions flooded his mind: Would they still be alive? If so, would they still live here? And if so to all of these, would they welcome him home?

Imagine his delight and surprise when finally the old homestead came into view and once again he saw a lighted lantern in the front window. He rushed in to a glad reunion with his now aged parents. What he was to discover in that reunion was that every night since he had left, they had placed the lighted lantern in the window just in case a rebellious and wayward son would come home. The lantern was their way of saying, "Welcome home, Son, welcome home."

The message is that there is a lighted lantern in the heavenly Father's house. He, like the father in Jesus' story, stands by the side of the road waiting and watching and hoping that one of his lost children will make the decision to come home. What the prodigal son could not realize was that his father had forgiven him long before he came to himself and decided to go home. In a parallel sense, when Jesus died on the cross, his death pronounced and won your forgiveness. You have already been forgiven, even before you ask. But to receive that forgiveness, we must do what the prodigal son did—we must receive it for ourselves by making a decision to go home. The son would never have realized that the father had already forgiven him and he would never have known the joy of being received back into the family as a son if he had not come to himself and made the decision to go home.

My friend, the insight into the heart of God that is at the center of the gospel that Jesus teaches us here is that God loves his lost children. He is a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in the open country and goes in search of the one that is lost. He is a woman who has ten coins but loses one and who then turns the house upside down in search of it until she finds it. And he is a loving father who stands by the side of the road waiting and hoping and who, when he sees his lost son coming down the road, throws dignity to the wind and goes running and then embraces him and showers him with lavish expressions of his joy. But to receive this lavish love, we must choose to go home. And the question with which I leave you is simply this: Will you so choose?

*No longer do I my comfort draw
From my frail grasp of thee,
But rather, Lord, in this I rejoice with awe
Of Thy mighty grasp of me.
For ere since that day I saw
The stream Thy flowing wounds supplied
Redeeming grace has been my theme
And shall be till I die.*

Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

Matthew 4:18–20; 28:19

By Dr. Randall Spence

This morning I want to ask a pointed question of you. The question is this: *For what reason did Christ create the church?*

Another way of asking the question is to ask it like this: *For whom does the church primarily exist?* The Christian who is a member of that church or the ones out there who have yet to be won? Before giving answer to the question, let me share with you both the first and the last thing Jesus would speak to his disciples, for in these words I believe we get a clue and some valuable insight into his purposes for the church.

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him. (Matt 4:18–20 NIV)

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Matt 28:19 NIV)

We have here the first thing and the last thing that Jesus said to his disciples, and both have to do with going and with making disciples. If these were his first words and his last, it would seem pretty obvious that Jesus’ expectations of the church are that we place as the main thing the church is called to do is to make disciples.

Let me return to the question I asked a few moments ago: For whom does the church primarily exist—the members or those yet to be won? If you answer that the church primarily exists for the members, you responded as most Christians in America respond. The church is primarily here for us. But while you would be responding as most would respond, you would also be wrong.

The correct answer is that the church exists for both—the believer as well as those yet to be won. However, the pivotal question becomes, Who gets priority? Whose needs take precedence? If the answer for your church is that the priority goes to the needs and wants of the membership, then your church, like over 90 percent of the congregations throughout the country, has become ingrown. One of the most common signs or symptoms of an ingrown church is that it plateaus or enters into a state of decline. Another sign or symptom of an ingrown church is that there is internal conflict, with the people picking at each other and especially at the pastor and staff. Yet still another sign of an inwardly focused church is that the things that get addressed are those things that the members want, such as style of music, times of services, programs and ministries pursued, and so forth.

Let me tell you a true story of one day in the life of a young pastor, one that tragically tells the story of many a congregation. It’s a story of what happened to a young pastor who faced a situation every pastor hopes to avoid. This pastor’s ministry took a quick downturn when one day he received two phone calls back-to-back. One was from the family of a leader in the church who had just been involved in a serious accident and might not live through the night. The man was a key leader in that

church and a fine Christian gentleman as was his family. The family asked the pastor if he could come immediately.

The other call was from a woman in the church whose biker, hard-drinking, hard-living brother had just been involved in a serious motorcycle accident. He was quite critical but was asking for this young pastor, who had struck up a friendship with him.

This young pastor had a dilemma such as none of us want. To whom do you think he should go? Who should be his priority?

The pastor reasoned to himself like this. The leader in his church was saved and he felt confident was right with the Lord. The biker who never stepped in the door was admittedly on the road to hell. As a result, this young pastor elected to go to the biker's bed, reasoning that he might make a commitment to the Lord, especially since he was asking for him. He contacted another leader in the church and dispatched him to the churchman's bedside. The biker did make a death bed confession and died that very night. The leader in the church died as well.

In the following weeks the pastor came under great criticism from the church about his priorities. It was reasoned that his first priority should have been to the elder in the church since he and his family were key persons in the church and had supported the church for years. In choosing to go to the dying biker, he revealed priorities that were unacceptable to the church. As a result, he was fired. So devastated was he over this firing, that he became one of the 1,700 pastors who leave ministry each month.

Let me ask you. To whom do you think the pastor should have gone? If your answer is the leader in the church, then this reveals to you a large part of why our churches are not growing and why our communities look at us from the sideline and declare that we are irrelevant. It is all because we are more concerned with the members of the family than we are with those who are desperately in need of salvation. Our churches aren't growing because we are focused inwardly on ourselves instead of outwardly on our communities.

At the risk of sounding harsh, let me be prophetic. Many of our congregations will not survive the next couple of decades because they're stuck in the 1950s in many cases and because they see and value the church as family instead of that of a mission post or lifesaving station. Too frequently we want our needs met and our hands held more than we want to reach our communities with the gospel. And so our communities continue to drive by our door on Sundays because they see us as uncaring, judgmental, and irrelevant to their lives. Until we wake up and realize that the church exists primarily for those not yet members, then the world will see us as irrelevant.

One of the popularized and romanticized metaphors we have adopted in the church is that of the congregation as a herd of sheep and the pastor as the shepherd. We think of passages such as Psalm 23 which describes the Lord as our shepherd and how he cares for us as his sheep. Such imagery we have taken over into the church as we view the pastor as an undershepherd whose job is to take care of his flock. While there's great truth in this metaphor, it can't stop there.

For what reason does a shepherd have a flock of sheep? Is it to care for them like pets? No, sheep are not pets; they serve a utilitarian purpose. The shepherd cares for them because they serve a purpose. He eats them for food, he sells them to make a profit, and he sheers them to sell their wool

and to make clothing for himself. In other words, the sheep serve a purpose and are not just there to be cared for their own sake.

Perhaps a better metaphor is that of us as being members of the body, a metaphor given to us by the apostle Paul. We are all members of one body and as members each of us plays a part. My hands are not a part of my body just for the rest of me to care for. No, they serve a function; they have a purpose. And so it is with us as members of Christ's body the church.

As members of the church, we must keep in mind that God did not save us from our sins so we can come to church and be cared for by the pastor and his staff. No, we are not here just to be cared for but to be a productive part of the body. And if we are to keep the main thing the main thing, we can never forget that ultimately this means we will be seeking to bring other sheep into the fold so they too can know the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep.

We must never lose sight of the fact that God is not just a Shepherd who cares for his sheep, but he is a Shepherd who has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Jesus tells us that he leaves the ninety-nine in the open country and goes in search of that lost sheep until he finds it. And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home and calls for his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him for he has found his lost sheep. Jesus then concludes this story with these words in Luke 15:7: "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (NIV).

Jesus goes on to tell us more about God's values when he tells the story of the woman who has ten silver coins but one day loses one. She lights a lamp, sweeps the house and looks until she finally finds it. And when she does find it, she calls her friends and neighbors and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin" (Luke 15:10 NIV). Jesus then concludes the story with these words in Luke 15:10: "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (NIV).

Finally Jesus tells the most well known and popular story ever told—the story of the prodigal son.

There once was a man who had two sons. One day the younger one came to him and said, "Dad, I can't wait around here until you die. I want my inheritance now. Much to everyone's amazement, the father gave his son his wish by dividing up his property and giving his younger son his share.

Soon thereafter the young man left home and traveled to a foreign country, where he proceeded to squander his father's wealth. It was wine, women, and song. After he had spent it all, there was a severe famine in the land and the young man began to be in need. So hungry and desperate was he that he did something that no Jewish boy in his right mind would have done—he went and hired himself out to a man who sent him to feed his pigs. So hungry and so desperate was he that he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that he fed the pigs. But no one gave him anything.

But one day he came to his senses. He thought to himself, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare and here I am starving to death? I know what I will do. I will go back to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Would you please take me in as one of your hired servants?'" So he got up and began the long journey home; the journey back to his father.

Why is it that this story strikes such a chord in our hearts? Is it not because we all can identify? Can we not all say on some level, “That’s my story?” When the young man first struck out from home, he did so with the swag and the sway of the son of a rich man with his pockets filled with money and his cocky heart filled with a sense of liberation and a desire to see and to experience the world. He was on top of the world. But he, like so many of us, made some foolish decisions and found himself a long way from the father and in time in poverty—monetarily and in soul. Before he smelled like the latest and most expensive cologne; now he smelled like the pigs that he fed. Before he had walked with a strut; now he walked with his tail tucked between his legs in embarrassment and defeat.

Is that not the story of many of us? We were that prodigal child who one day came to his senses? But the story does not stop there. When the young man decided to turn his heart toward home, when he was still a distance away, his father looked up and saw walking down the road that familiar crop of hair, that walk that he would know anywhere. And how did he respond? His heart was filled with compassion and he ran, yes he ran to his son, he threw his arms around him even though he smelled like the pigs he had tended, and he kissed him. Yes, he put all dignity aside and kissed his son.

And what did the son do? He began to recite his prepared and rehearsed litany, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son”(v 21 NIV). But his father interrupted his rehearsed speech by turning to his servants and barking these orders, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a signet ring on his finger denoting sonship and put sandals on his feet and kill the fatted calf and let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (vv 22–24, adapted from NIV). And this portion of the story concludes with the words, “So they began to celebrate” (v 24 NIV).

What the son could not know or understand was that long before he had come to his senses and decided to return home, the father had forgiven him. Before he had even asked for the father’s forgiveness, it was given. But that, my friends, is the nature of God.

My friends, if we are to be tuned in to the heartbeat of God, we must never forget that he is a God whose heart beats for lost sons and daughters. He is a God who stands by the side of the road watching and waiting for his lost sons and daughters to come to their senses and to come home.

An important question for each of us to consider this morning is this? Are we like the father or are we more like the elder son who only resented the graciousness of the father? Do we see lost people through the eyes of the Father or through the eyes of the elder son? Until God breaks our hearts for lost people, our churches will remain inwardly focused and the community will continue to drive by Sunday after Sunday concluding that we don’t really care and that we have no relevance to their lives.

Let me conclude my message with a parable. Please listen as I read:

There was once a lifesaving station in the east that sat overlooking a treacherous coast where many shipwrecks occurred. The lifesaving station wasn’t anything to look at and the members were few in number, but they were dedicated to the task of saving those whose ships wrecked off the coast. In time the little lifesaving station began to gain some notoriety as several influential persons were rescued. As a result, many others wanted to join the ranks of the lifesaving station. In time as they

grew, the building seemed inadequate, so they elected to enlarge and improve the lifesaving station. They put in new carpet and showers and made the place really nice.

About that time there was a large ship that wrecked off the coast. The lifesaving station rescuers worked long and hard and brought many wet and dirty people into the lifesaving station who had just been rescued from the raging seas. As a result the lifesaving station was a mess.

In the course of time fewer and fewer people wanted to go out into the seas to do the dirty and hard work of rescuing persons shipwrecked at sea. As a result they hired rescue workers to go in their stead. But as time passed, lifesaving became less and less of a priority. Oh, they still had a symbolic boat in the front of the lifesaving station as a symbol of what they were, but few, if any, ever went out to save lives. Instead they became like a social club where they had meetings and parties for themselves and their families. They still sang songs about saving lives, but they never did so any longer.

At a meeting of the lifesaving station, there arose a dissent amongst the members as to whether or not they should even continue with lifesaving. After all, it was hard work and you never knew about the kind of people who were being brought into the lifesaving station. A few of the members protested, saying that lifesaving was in reality what they were all about. Unfortunately, they were outvoted and told that if they wanted to do lifesaving, to feel free to move somewhere down the shore and to begin their own lifesaving station.

They did. At first they rescued many persons from the stormy seas. However, in time history was to repeat itself and yet another lifesaving station was to begin and then another and yet another. If you go to that seacoast today, you will see many lifesaving stations dotting the coast. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters. But most of the people drown.

Whose Mat Are You Carrying?

By Rev. Melissa Pratt

When Jesus returned to Capernaum several days later, the news spread quickly that he was back home. Soon the house where he was staying was so packed with visitors that there was no more room, even outside the door. While he was preaching God's word to them, four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. They couldn't bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, so they dug a hole through the roof above his head. Then they lowered the man on his mat, right down in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "My child, your sins are forgiven."... Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, "Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!" And the man jumped up, grabbed his mat, and walked out through the stunned onlookers. They were all amazed and praised God, exclaiming, "We've never seen anything like this before!" (Mark 2:1-5, 10b-12 NLT)

Mark wastes no time exposing his readers to the reasons Jesus came to earth. His cousin, John the Baptist, prepared the way for Jesus at the opening of chapter one. Jesus was baptized, and then he headed into the wilderness where he dealt with temptations from Satan, overcoming them. Then he chose his disciples, and boom, they were face to face with a demon-possessed man in the synagogue. The possessed guy started shouting things at Jesus and the disciples, and when Jesus rebuked the demon, the demon screamed out, threw the man into convulsions, and then came out of the man.

I'm sure Peter and Andrew looked at James and John in shock as they wondered what they had just gotten into. They were familiar with rabbis who would teach the Scriptures and talk about how people should live, but this rabbi was hands-on in a new way. Jesus showed them right out of the chute that *he had come to set captives free.*

In the very next few verses in chapter one, Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and a host of others. Jesus showed them from the get go that *he had come to bring healing.* Then he turned exorcist again and cast out a more demons.

At the conclusion of chapter one, Jesus then did the unimaginable! He touched a leper and healed him. He showed the disciples and all who were following him that *he had also come to touch us in a deeply personal and miraculous way.*

Now we get to chapter 2, where we see Jesus reveal something else about his mission. When he healed the paralytic, he also forgave his sins. Jesus revealed that *his mission went beyond the physical and right into the heart of man, to the forgiveness of sins.* And in this episode, Jesus also allowed the disciples to see that we have a part to play, that we have a role in bringing people to the point where they can receive what they really need, which is salvation and the forgiveness of their sins.

What Jesus did for the paralytic man was life altering. That's what an encounter with Jesus is. It's life altering. Jesus gave the paralytic new life. He went home empowered. He would no longer be helpless. What had carried him, he now was carrying. He went home as a joyful worshiper. Best of all, he went home clean. His sins were washed away!

His salvation was made possible because he met Jesus, and that meeting was assisted by four men who made some amazing and faith-filled decisions. Who are you helping to get to Jesus? Whose mat are you carrying?

Whoever these men were, they saw something about this man that moved them. His helplessness moved them. I can't imagine how the conversation started. Maybe they had been dropping by his house, bringing him food, making sure he had what he needed to survive. Maybe each one of them would take a day during the week just to look in on him, just to talk to him so that he didn't sink into great depression and obscurity from intense loneliness. I get the feeling from the text that these men knew the man they were taking to Jesus. They weren't likely people who were just walking by and suddenly stopped and turned to one another and said, "Hey, let's each grab a corner of this guy's mat." No, these were friends, people in relationship with this guy who had an increasing burden to see him get help.

You see, taking our friends to Jesus begins with a *burden* to see them helped, to see them saved. We used to call it having a "soul burden." How easy has it become for us to just keep to ourselves, mind our own business, and dismiss the reality that those who are not in Christ will die and go to hell? Does that reality bother us? Does it *move* us? Do we care that there are those who are helpless to get to Christ because of sin and their life circumstances enough that we will do something to try to assist the process.

We read in Romans 9:1–4 that Paul had a soul burden for the people of Israel. He says, "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have *great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart*. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (NIV). He was basically saying that he would give his own life, his own soul, if his fellow countrymen could know Christ and be saved. He says his heart is full of sorrow and unceasing anguish over those who hadn't accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

Jeremiah is called the "weeping prophet" because of the tears he cried over the unrepentant people of Israel. In Jeremiah 9:1 he says, "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people" (NIV). He saw destruction coming their way and they weren't listening to his warnings. It broke his heart.

In Exodus 32, Moses was meeting with God on the mountain when God told him he wanted him to go down because the people of Israel had turned away from God. In Moses's absence they were having orgies and had made for themselves a golden calf, which they were worshiping. God was angry with his people and told Moses, "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (v 10). What an opportunity for Moses. What a chance of a lifetime! But Moses declined the offer, telling God that they were his people and that if he was going to destroy them, it would put God's glory on the line. Then he pleaded with God not to destroy them.

Then Moses came down and saw the terrible behavior of God's people. Through the Levites, God killed about three thousand people for their crime; beginning in verse 30 we read, "The next day Moses said to the people, 'You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.' So Moses went back to the LORD and said, 'Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written,'" meaning the book of life. In other words, Moses was telling God, "Send me to hell on behalf of these people. Take me out of heaven, throw me into hell, but save your people, the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Do you hear the anguish these men of God had for souls? What a soul burden.

How long has it been since your heart was broken that your spouse, your parents, your children, your grandparents, your aunt or uncle, niece or nephew, friend, neighbor or coworker didn't know Jesus as Savior?

Getting people to Jesus is in our job description as Christians. Matthew 28:19 says we are to go and make disciples. The word *go* implies that we take some initiative. We don't wait for people to come up to us and say, "I've noticed you seem to have a real peace in life. Could you possibly come to my house, bring your Bible and teach me how to have the same peace?" Folks, it's not going to happen. We need to start some conversations. We need to pray again to have a soul burden for those who are lost, and we need to try to develop relationships with people who are spiritually helpless. We need to target them and begin praying for them, talking about the Lord with them, and helping them to see how Christ can make a difference in their lives.

On a scale of one to ten right now in this minute, how burdened are you for people who don't know Jesus? It's one thing to want or hope everyone to be saved and enter into a relationship with Christ. It's another thing to *do something* to be a part of someone's journey in finding Christ. This past week, did you pray for anyone who was lost? Did you start a faith conversation with anyone you know? Did you testify to anyone about an answer to prayer or how God is at work in your life? Did you post something evangelistic on your Facebook page and follow up on comments people made who aren't in Christ yet? Did you invite anyone to church? If you didn't *do* anything this past week to pick up someone who is spiritually helpless and carry them closer to Jesus, you have to evaluate how heavy your soul burden really is, because there are lost people everywhere.

"Well, Pastor, we have to be careful. We don't want to offend people or hurt their feelings." Better to risk offense or a hurt feeling than to risk someone going into eternity being lost in hell forever.

Jesus came to earth and paid the price for our sin. While he was here, he developed disciples that he sent into the world. They were commissioned to make more disciples. That's it. There isn't another plan. Jesus isn't coming back to give more time or a second chance. No angels are going to be sent to reinforce Jesus' message. His plan is that the message be distributed through the church, through people who are Christians and have experienced forgiveness for their sins. There is no plan B. We're it. If we don't do it, the consequences are awful.

I can't imagine someone standing at the judgment who is about to be cast into hell and the reason they give for not turning to Christ is that no one told them they could or should. Christ has commissioned us to carry the helpless to him. Connecting people to Jesus begins with a great burden and a commitment to see that they make it, whatever it takes.

Not only did the four friends have a burden for their friend, but they were *bent* on getting him there. They weren't going to give up until the man on the mat was face to face with Jesus. Carrying anyone, no matter how light they were, was going to take some effort. There was great effort involved in getting this man to Jesus. A lot of people would have given up when they saw the crowded house where Jesus was teaching. They'd be tempted to give up, go home, and wait for a more convenient day.

There are people who need to be here this morning, and you mustn't give up on them. Some of them used to come and have just gotten out of the habit of getting up on Sundays. Some have had

their feelings hurt over something that happened in the past. Some are embarrassed about the way they are living and they don't think they should come to church until they get their ducks in a row. Hound them in love. Tell them to quack their way back here, and keep praying for them to return. Isn't that what Jesus said in the parable of the lost sheep? The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to go find the one that is missing. Some of your family members are missing this morning. Some of your friends are missing. Go after them. Don't give up. Don't let them just walk away. Pursue them. Be bent on making sure they are connected with Jesus. We should not make it easy for people to leave the family of God.

Sometimes getting people to Jesus takes time, and we have to make up our minds that we'll stick with them for as long as it takes. We have to be bent on making sure they get to connect with him. Sometimes being bent on something requires some creativity, some ingenuity. Sometimes we have to take a backdoor approach. Sometimes witnessing has to get unconventional.

You may spend months getting to know someone before you ever start a faith conversation. There might have to be a lot of lunches, tennis matches, soccer games where you sit together, times of fellowship, and displays of caring in someone's life before you talk to them about the Lord. You might witness through free babysitting, free tutoring, and free blood pressure screenings. You might need to start running errands for people or paying for someone's groceries in front of you when they have come up short. Occasionally, you might get to lead someone to Christ in a one-time meeting, but usually it takes time and some creativity.

If these guys were going to get their friend to Jesus, they were going to have to think of another approach. The front door wasn't going to get them there. They couldn't get in. They were going to have to carry this man up a set of steps and onto the roof.

Gone are the days when we hang out a sign that says "Revival This Week! Ya'll Come!" and people actually come. Traditional methods of evangelism often don't work. Sometimes it's a creative approach like a divorce care ministry, family fun days, free movies and pizza nights, and free voice lessons.

I teach a free class voice class twice a year and usually have fifteen people from the community participate in each class. After the four-week class, they do a recital for their friends and family during week five. We stock the audience with all kinds of evangelistic plants from our church and host a reception after the recital. It's all a setup in order to give us the opportunity to meet more unchurched/unsaved people! I've done nine classes since we moved to West Virginia, and we've finally had some people visit our church as a result this past year. It takes time to build relationships and trust with people. Don't give up on a creative approach just because you don't see fruit right away!

God has been using our church's creative approaches to win people to Christ. Our church has tripled in four and a half years, and we have had more than one hundred first-time conversions. We've done everything from activities for seniors, addiction recovery, weight loss support, self-defense classes, free blood pressure screenings, Red Cross babysitting events, drug prevention seminars, scrapbooking clubs, quilting classes, Bible studies in restaurants and workplaces, neighborhood dessert nights, marriage seminars, prayer walks, pony rides, carnivals, after school care, taekwondo classes, and more. A statewide mental health agency uses our facility for their trainings. Three different neighborhood associations use our building for their meetings. We've

hosted a free wedding-vow renewal service. We provide fleece tied blankets to the local sheriff's department so that every deputy has a blanket in their cruiser. If they have to remove a child from their home, the child gets a blanket from our church to take with them. If they come upon an accident and the victim is cold, the blanket is used to cover them until help can arrive. Blankets are tied and anointed during the prayer time in our morning services as we ask God to heal and give encouragement to the recipients.

If we can offer it and it doesn't compromise our Christian witness, it happens at our church. We leave invitation cards and free pens in waiting rooms and lobbies all over our community. We provide snacks at funeral homes and in hospital waiting rooms in ICU. Our largest Sunday school class isn't inside the walls of our church; it is at a nursing home one mile from our church and is held during our Sunday school hour. One of our young men in his late twenties was diagnosed with colon cancer a few years ago. He has since been healed, but since he spent some time in the hospital, our men's group simply moved their Wednesday night Bible study to a room the hospital provided so that Randall could attend and that others could see what it means for the body of Christ to support someone in their time of need. You can't imagine the e-mails and comments I received from hospital staff and people in the community about those twenty-five guys and their hospital ministry. Our people have just gotten into the habit of trying to leave some salt and spread some light wherever they are!

We are blessed to own seventy-four acres one mile from our current location. Waiting there are all kinds of back door, creative approaches for carrying our community to Jesus. Sports fields; walking trails; camping areas; a double gymnasium, which will also serve as a banquet and conference facility; picnic areas; an outdoor amphitheatre; low ropes courses; soccer and softball fields; basketball, volleyball, and tennis courts; and more are being planned.

We can't see a crowded room as an obstacle and give up. We can't look at someone with a drug addiction and give up. We can't look at people who are atheists and give up. We can't look at busy people and give up. We can't look at cranky people and give up. We can't look at foul-mouthed people and give up. There are always going to be obstacles in our way when it comes to getting people to Jesus. We ought to expect that. Satan lives to put obstacles in our way and in the way of people who need Jesus.

We also can't look at ourselves and give up. We can't look at our limited knowledge of the Bible and give up. We can't look at our limited resources and give up. We can't look at our time constraints and give up. There is no one God can't use. There is no one God won't equip. God will use any vessel that is yielded to him and will empower that person to jump over every hurdle, push past every obstacle and break through every barrier when that person is bent on getting someone to Jesus. Don't give up. Look to Jesus for the wisdom, strength, and resources to help you bring people to him.

Not only are the men in our text creative, but they were also bold. Putting a hole in someone's roof isn't usually appreciated. They literally removed a section of someone's roof, and they interrupted a church service in the process. Verse 4 tells us that they had to dig a hole in the roof. The roof was made of branches, twigs, and mud. They basically had to dig through and claw through the mud in order to take their friend to Jesus. Listen, God is challenging all of us here today. If we are going to do our job as soul winners, there are going to be times when we have to get our hands dirty. Not

everyone we will come into contact with will be waxed and polished. Some of them are going to be sitting in some dirt, and if we're going to get them to where Jesus is we're going to have to get dirty.

Not only did they have to get dirty in order to take the man through the roof, but they had to be ready to fix the roof they had just destroyed. Being bent on taking people to Jesus will affect our pocket books. The four friends were going to have to pay for roof repairs.

Building a community center and community park is going to cost big money for our church in West Virginia. It will take God using each person to accomplish it. But I happen to believe all of the resources we need, God has already supplied. We're just going to have to allow our burden for souls to create a tenacity in each one of us that whatever it takes is what we're willing to do.

Brothers and sisters, God is asking us as his children to wake up to our calling, to wake up to the spiritually helpless around us; he is calling us to action. These four men had a burden. They were bent on getting this man to Jesus. They displayed great boldness. We see that when they reached Jesus, they *believed* in him to the point that in verse 5 we read this: "Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, 'My child, your sins are forgiven.'" He saw *their* faith. Don't underestimate how important *your* faith is in the process of bringing people to Jesus. Jesus saw their faith as they were attempting to bring someone to Jesus. He knew they believed something!

They believed Jesus had an answer for their lame friend's problems. They believed that Jesus cared so much about people that he wouldn't rebuke them for interrupting the church service that Jesus was holding.

How much faith do you express when you think about bringing your friends to Jesus? Does Jesus see your faith? If someone you know isn't a Christian and is struggling, do they see your faith which helps them get to Jesus? Do you see what a gift the four men's faith was for the crippled man? Your faith, if it's on display, is a conduit for miracles to happen! Do you realize this morning that the first step in healing and help for many of the people around you is for you to put your faith on display? This Bible account shows us that faith and action are a powerful combination!

Acts 1:8 says that we are God's witnesses to the ends of the earth and that in the power of the Holy Spirit we can do what God has called us to do. We either believe what God has said and trust his empowering or we won't be able to express faith in trying to bring people to the Lord.

The Bible says that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6 NIV). Without faith, everything we do in church is empty. We can sing songs, but unless we sing *in faith*, believing that our worship touches the heart of God and that he responds to us, we might as well be singing in the shower or with the radio. We can pray, but unless we pray *in faith*, we are just mouthing empty words. However, when we pray in faith, God's Word says we can move mountains. We can give in the offering to satisfy our own desire to support a local church, but what God wants us to do is give *in faith*, believing him and taking him at his word that when we give, he will open up the windows of heaven and pour out so much blessing we won't have room for it all! There is something about the expression of our faith that releases God to do the miraculous in our midst.

We need to live in an atmosphere of faith. Everything we do and everywhere we go should be about expressing our faith. Do you believe God has called you to be a fisher of men?

Andrew is not one of the most talked about disciples—not like James and John, or Peter, his brother. But every time we read about Andrew, he’s bringing someone to Christ. He brought his brother, Peter, to the Lord. He brought the boy with the fish to Jesus. He brought some Greeks with questions to Jesus. No, he’s not recognized as great. But he shared Christ with the people around him. And when you stop to think about it, what could possibly be greater than that? He lived in the realm of faith. He believed what God had said about his being a fisher of men, and he believed Jesus had the answer for those that he brought to Jesus.

Joseph Stowell tells about a time their family was on a Christmas trip to Chicago.¹ Each year they would take their family to spend time with Grandpa and Grandma and visit the museums. One year, they decided to finish their Christmas shopping at suburban Woodfield Mall.

In the midst of all the fun and excitement, one family member finally noticed that little three-and-a-half-year-old Matthew was gone. Terror immediately struck their hearts. They split up, each taking an assigned location. The father, Joseph Stowell, took the parking lot. He says, “I’ll never forget that night—kicking through the newly fallen snow, calling out his name at the top of my lungs. Unsuccessful, I trudged back to our meeting point. My wife, Martie, had not found him, nor had my mother.

“And then my dad appeared, holding little Matthew by the hand. Our hearts leapt for joy. Interestingly enough, Matthew was untraumatized. He hadn’t been crying. To him, there had been no problem. I asked my father where he had found him. ‘The candy counter,’ he replied. ‘You should have seen him. His eyes came just about as high as the candy. He held his little hands behind his back and moved his head back and forth, surveying all the luscious options.’” Matthew didn’t look lost. He didn’t know he was lost. He was oblivious to the phenomenal danger he was in.

Church, the crippled man knew he was crippled, but I don’t know if he knew he was lost. This is a candy-counter culture, where people don’t look lost and don’t know they’re lost. If the man didn’t know he was lost, he knew it when Jesus got finished forgiving him of his sin. But he may have never known he was lost if his friends hadn’t put some faith into action.

Are you bothered that there are people living and working around you every day that are lost? How do you deal with that reality deep in your soul? Are you bent on making sure that as far as it depends on you that they’ll get face to face with Jesus somehow? What bold move have you made to make it happen? What do you believe about your calling and about Jesus’ ability to transform lives? I’m asking you today, “Whose mat are you carrying?”

¹ Joseph M. Stowell, *Moody Monthly*, December 1989, 4.

Closing the Gap Between Us and Them

Luke 18:9

By Rev. Steve Birch

Grady Nutt used to preach on the text in John 4, the story of the woman at the well. In the text, it says that Jesus took the disciples through Samaria on their way to Galilee. This made sense because it was the most direct route. Grady explained that it was an unusual way for Jews to travel. They typically went around Samaria. In fact Grady Nutt, as only he could, described the scene.

Jesus: "Let's go back to Galilee."

Peter: "OK, but you are going the wrong way."

Jesus: "What do you mean the wrong way? This is the quickest route."

Peter: "Yes, but you see, Lord, we always go this way and then across."

Jesus: "But this way is shorter."

Peter: "I know, Lord, but you see what we always do. We go up here and go across."

Jesus: By this time Jesus was smiling at Peter's discomfort. "Peter, it makes no sense to go miles out of our way."

Peter: "But, Lord, this way is through Samaria."

Jesus: "So?"

Peter: "Well there are Samaritans in Samaria."

Jesus: "So?"

Peter: "Well they are just waiting to jump out and be Samaritans right in front of us."

Nutt then concluded that this was the very nature of prejudice, people waiting to jump out and be Samaritans right in front of us.

Today we will be looking at Jesus' attitude towards those who are different from us.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

(Luke 18:9–14 NIV)

Hugh Steven in his book *Wycliffe in the Making* tells the story of Cam and Elvira Townsend. These two newlyweds began missionary service in the 1920s among the Cakchiquel Indians of Guatemala.

Their task was to evangelize, make disciples, and plant churches among the Cakchiquel Indians, using the Spanish language. The problem was the Indians did not speak Spanish and the Spanish-speaking people of Guatemala considered them second-class citizens. When Cam Townsend decided the best way to reach them was by translating the Bible into their own language, his idea was frowned upon by the missionary board.

Although this is a widely accepted missionary principle today, in those days it was radical. Translating the Bible into an ethnic language was time consuming and its kingdom impact might be small. Although the missionary board may not have been prejudiced, they were concerned about the big distance between the Indians and themselves.

In our Bible story from Luke's gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a Pharisee and tax collector. The Pharisee dwells on the distance between them and us. He plays a comparison game. "I thank you that I am not like other men." His thin veneer of righteousness covers a man of pride.

Most of us would never associate our style with the Pharisee. But how often have we emphasized the differences in them and us as an excuse not to reach out with God's love?

- I am too old to witness to them. I could never relate?
- I am too poor to be effective with them. I just can't quite get on their level.

We become like the Pharisee, emphasizing the difference between the unholy and us, just as the missionary board wanted the Indians to become Spanish to hear the gospel. Sometimes we expect people to become like we are in order to hear the message of Christ. We in the Church of God love the message of unity, but unity becomes uncomfortable when we are different.

A few years ago I was in a conference in Colorado with a young man named Jeff, who directed Mile High Ministries in Denver. This is an inner-city street ministry in down town Denver. Jeff was sharing that the ministry began for runaway kids. They had a coffee shop where kids could come in get warm; the waiters and waitresses were believers and often witnessed to the kids. The music they loved was '60s stuff that Jeff played on his guitar. A couple of years ago, the crowd began to change. No longer was it just Anglo runaways. Now the coffee shop was attracting gang members and African Americans. Jeff kept playing his '60s music, but no one was listening. So they shifted to hip-hop music, even though Jeff cannot really relate to it. He told me "I could demand they become like me or I could try to meet them where they were living."

Holiness is more about how you respond to others than it is about how you dress or look. I have a friend in Deltona, Florida. She decided to start taking prayer walks around her neighborhood. She would walk in the morning and breathe a prayer for the houses she passed. Sometimes she would bake a cake and just drop it by her neighbors. Over a period of three years, she was able to lead several neighbors to Christ and to help in several very difficult situations. It is one thing to say we love; it is another to actually love. How much would it cost you to take a walk around your neighborhood and think about the people who need Christ? Think of all the benefits of getting healthy and also to begin to pray for those around us.

- Take prayer walks and pray for the homes. Don't kneel in front yards, but breathe a prayer for the people living there as you pass.
- Some might go further out of their comfort zone and knock on doors. "Hi I am your neighbor just down the street. As I walk each day, I am praying for my neighbors. Do you have anything specifically you would like for me to pray for? Are there any special needs you have that you would like me to mention to God?"

- There are always some people who are easy to pray for and others who aren't. There are some Gordon McDonald calls "Very Draining People." And sometimes we avoid them because we know it is not going to be a three-minute prayer and then we can hit the road. Sometimes prayer involves investing our lives in others.
- How often do we miss opportunities because of the commitment it will take?

To be holy requires that we act in love towards the people God loves. Who does God love?
Everyone you meet!

The church I served in Lexington was primarily an upper-middle-class professional congregation. Right beside our property was a subdivision that became Title 8, which allowed low income folks to rent. Suddenly, our neighbors looked very different from us. We had two gyms and our neighbors started to show up and play basketball. Most of them were from poor homes. Many had fathers in prison. They scared some of our youth. I would like to tell you that reaching out to these folks was easy. It was not! We lost some families because we dared to care for these kids. These kids were not always easy to love. They became angry! They were distrustful. But we reached some.

Being holy is being willing to allow God to direct our plans and our resources.

Marcia Martin, the wife of our worship pastor in Lexington, shared with me the story of her neighbor. Marcia was leaving Oregon to come to Kentucky. She quit her job to pack the house while Rod came to Kentucky six weeks before the family and was here at Liberty Ridge, our assisted living facility. Because she was not working, she was outside to see Zachary off to school. She met her neighbor Melinda for the first time. Melinda had lived across the street for four years. She was also home for the first time because she was out of work with a disability.

Melinda came up to Marcia and said, "Aren't you Pastor Rod's wife? I recently visited your church." She told Marcia a little of their problems. They were already poor with both she and her husband working. With just his income, things were pretty desperate. Marcia told her about the food pantry at their church. That should have been enough. After all Marcia was getting her family ready to move to Kentucky and this was no longer her problem.

Marcia found out they were not going to have to pay out as much cash as they had anticipated in buying their home here. She went to the grocery store and while there the thought occurred to her that she was there celebrating a blessing and Melinda was wondering how to feed her kids. Marcia bought Melinda \$150 worth of groceries. The food store manager also attended the Albany church, so Marcia told him Melinda's problem and he made more food available.

When Marcia showed up with the food Melinda began to cry. "We had just finished the cake you had brought over, and I told my husband Mario that God would provide."

Marcia prayed with her about a job and her hurt arm. Melinda shared with Marcia a terrible story of a life of abuse. She was pregnant by her mother's boyfriend at age twelve. She had gone to church earlier in her life, but one of her daughters had been abused by the children's minister and she had decided to give up on church.

Marcia talked to her about forgiveness. She said, “I have been away from God. I have had an abortion; I have given two of my children away.”

The last Sunday Marcia was in church Melinda went forward at the altar call to give her life to Christ. She told Marcia that she had asked the Lord for a sign. “If you are my God show me that you care about me. The next day you show up with \$150 of groceries.”

There were lots of reasons to avoid Melinda. Her life was a tangled mess of problems, and Marcia was on a tight personal schedule. There was only one reason to get involved: Melinda is a dearly loved woman of God and we are called to love those he loved.

The last two verses from the book of James says, “My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (James 5:19–20 NIV).

- Restoration of a brother or sister requires that we take the initiative.
- Love always takes the initiative. As holy people, we do not wait for folks to come to us. We seek them out.
- Restoration requires prayer. None of us can save anyone or restore anyone. But we can pray for our heavenly Father to work in their lives and hearts.
- Restoration requires that we love people. Even the ones who stretch us and demand of us.

A few years ago I had a friend who was in serious trouble. He left his church, went on a drinking binge, and basically had a breakdown. I spent over one hundred hours with this man. There were times he would accuse and say that no one cared, but he could not deny that I was there. Over time, God began to heal his heart and restore him. Today he is a counselor helping others who have lost their way. Loving people is messy business. Sometimes it takes far more time than we want to give.

I love the story Jose Hobjoy shares about being on a plane traveling to speak at a conference for Christians. The ride was very bumpy and the lady behind Jose got very sick. She threw up all down the aisle of the plane. She was so embarrassed. Jose said her mother had always told her that loving folks was messy business. She thought to herself, “Mother!” as she grabbed some rags and began wiping up the vomit. Later Jose writes that if we are to love as Jesus loved we will find ourselves wiping up other people’s vomit both literally and figuratively.

But Luke tells us, “There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10 NIV).

Of all the things you will ever do, none will be more eternally significant than the time you spent allowing God to love through you. It is what being holy is about.

Will you be a lighthouse where you live? Don’t retreat behind closed doors with your television on for company. Step outside and see if there is someone nearby who needs a prayer.

Don’t thank God you are different than them. Thank God for the privilege of sharing with someone who needs a prayer.

A Standing Invitation

Isaiah 55:1; Matthew 11:28–30

By Dr. Adrienne Holmes

*Come every soul by sin oppressed,
There's mercy with the Lord,
And He will surely give you rest
By trusting in His Word.*

*Only trust Him, only trust Him,
Only trust Him now;
He will save you, He will save you,
He will save you now.*

In times like these, is anybody in the room today putting their trust in the Lord? In times like these, is anybody casting their cares upon the Lord? In times like these, does anybody need a Savior? Well, you have an invitation to come to Jesus.

Our Scripture lesson text today is taken from the gospel according to Matthew. The Old Testament prophets predicted and longed for the coming of the Anointed One who would enter history to bring redemption and deliverance. The first verse of Matthew announces that long-awaited event: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (RSV). Matthew provides the essential bridge between the Old and New Testaments. The gospel of Matthew connects the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Through a carefully selected series of Old Testament quotations, Matthew documents Jesus Christ’s claim to be Messiah. Jesus possesses the credentials of a Messiah, for who else but Messiah Jesus could stop by H&R Block with his credentials as a leader and a Savior and call Matthew from his tax collecting job, tell Matthew to follow him, and have Matthew turn in his 1040 forms, pack up his laptop computer, give his resignation, and turn to Jesus and say “Where you lead me, I will follow.”

Jesus ministers in a predicted pattern, like a Messiah. For who else but Messiah Jesus, the Great Physician, could step to the bed of a woman with a fever and without the aid of a hot toddy, Hennessey, tea and lemon, vicodin for pain, or Tylenol for flu, but just with the touch of his hand, take her up and have her go into the kitchen and cook collard greens, fried chicken, corn bread, and macaroni and cheese for her family?

Who else but the Great Physician, Jesus, could take a leper all covered with boils and just by the touch of his hand, without the aid of a dermatologist, a plastic surgeon, or even Vaseline Intensive Care lotion, make this man’s skin look as smooth as a baby’s bottom? Who else but a ministering Jesus called to be the Messiah?

Then Jesus preached as only a Messiah could preach. This Jesus stood on the deck of a ship and preached to the winds and the waves. Jesus gave the winds an asthma attack without an inhaler. They stopped their blowing and the waves shut their face and went to sleep.

Finally Jesus dies the death that only a Messiah could die, for they did not kill Jesus, but Jesus gave up the ghost. And when Jesus died, he made the earth reel and rock like a drunken man, told the moon it better not rise, made the sun cover its face and refuse to shine. Nobody else has died a death like Jesus, and no one else has had victory over death like Jesus, for Jesus died with two at his side, but he got up from the grave three days later all by himself. Truly this Jesus is the Messiah.

Then no one is coming back like the Messiah Jesus is coming back. In order for man to fly, man needs an airplane; but when Jesus comes back, he's coming in the air, not on an airplane, but riding a Bentley cloud. Ride on King Jesus, ride on. No man can hinder you.

Our text today comes from chapter 11 of the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus gives us a standing invitation, not to a party over here, but to a party for this life, a Holy Ghost party.

The first thing I want to bring to your attention in this message is that every person in this world, both the saved and the unsaved, has an invitation from Jesus that only they can RSVP to. But not everyone will accept the invitation. There is one word here, "come," but the "come" is for two sets of people.

The first person Jesus is inviting to come is those who are unsaved. Jesus is inviting them to salvation. The second set of people Jesus is inviting to come is those who are saved but who are not fully trusting him for everything.

What gives Jesus the authority to offer such an invitation? If you notice in verse 27a, it reads, "All things have been delivered to me by my Father" (RSV). You see, my dear people, Jesus is in control of all things, owns all things, and has power over all things, and that is why he offers such a powerful invitation to us to come to him, because he has all the resources to fulfill all of our needs.

You see, when we need something, we go to someone who has something to offer. We wouldn't go to a blind man to help us across the street, because the blind man can't see the cars. We wouldn't go to a homeless man for a place to stay, because the homeless man doesn't have a place to stay himself. We wouldn't go to a poor person to borrow some money, because the poor person doesn't have a dime, but we would go to someone whom we know has some money and has enough for themselves and hopefully a little bit for us. So in the text, Jesus, right out the gate, wants us to know that he is equipped to supply all of our needs.

The Jesus we serve doesn't need a doctor, because he is Jehovah Rophi [Rapha], our Healer. The Jesus we serve doesn't need a payday loan, because he owns the cattle on a thousand hills. The Jesus we serve doesn't need a psychiatrist, because he is the Wonderful Counselor. So since Jesus is all in all and he owns everything because God has given him everything, Jesus gives us a standing invitation to come to the One who is able and who can take care of us. So if you come to Jesus, I hear Jesus saying, "Be not dismayed. Whatever betide, I will take care of you."

Notice that Jesus doesn't force us to come. Neither does he try to persuade us to come, but he just offers a standing invitation, saying to us, "Come." And when we come to him, Jesus says, "All drinks are on me. I'll buy you a drink. You don't need any money, and it won't cost you anything." Isaiah 55:1 says, "Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat" (RSV).

The next thing I want us to notice in the text is to whom the invitation is offered. Jesus isn't calling the rich. Jesus isn't calling those who are satisfied. Jesus isn't calling those without problems or the know-it-alls. But Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor [or weary] and are heavy laden [or burdened]..." The word *labor*, or *weary*, means those who are wrestling with fatigue, those who are stressed out, those who are sick and tired of being sick and tired, those who are depressed, and those who are discouraged. The words *heavy laden* mean those who have tried to do things on their own but they just can't seem to pull it off; those who are in utter desperation; those who don't know which way to go; those who have tried everything else and there is nothing else to try. These are the ones whom Jesus gives this standing invitation to come.

Then the invitation in Isaiah too is not to the satisfied person but that invitation also is to those who thirst, those who need a spiritual refreshing, the person whose spirit is restless those who have been searching for the truth. You've tried Buddha, and Buddha still left you thirsty for something else. You've tried Mohammed, and Mohammed gave you a bean pie and some incense, but he left you still hungry and thirsty for something. You tried Scientology, but Scientology left you thirsty for something else. You tried alcohol, but when the drinking was over, it left you with a hangover and you were still thirsty for something else. You tried crack-cocaine, but when you came down, the problem was still there and you needed something else.

To everyone who is thirsty for something else, you who are stressed and Aleve isn't giving you relief, you who are sick and tired of being sick and tired and the valium or Zoloft isn't giving you relief, the alcoholic that's looking for peace in the bottle and you just can't find that peace, the tweaker that is looking for peace in the crack-cocaine and you are roaming the street and searching for the next high, Jesus is saying, "Come to me. I've got your fix. I've got the best high. I can be your private dancer. I can be your boo in the midnight hour and you won't have to pay me fifty dollars—if you just come to me."

Jesus says, "If you come to me, I will give you rest." Jesus is saying, "I will refresh you. I'll take away the pain that Bayer aspirin can't touch." Jesus is saying, "Come to me. I am the real thing that Coca-cola wants to be." Jesus is saying, "Come to me. I'm better than Tide, because I can get all the stains out." Jesus is saying, "Come to me, for I am better than Allstate, because in my hands you are safe and secure." Jesus is saying, "Come to me. I am better than Bounty, because I am the quicker picker upper. I can handle the tough jobs and I won't fall apart on you. I can pick you up from the gutter and save you." Jesus is offering you a standing invitation to come.

Then Jesus says that when you come, he will give you rest, meaning that he will refresh or revive you. The rest that Jesus will give is a rest that will give you freedom from the cares and burdens that rob us of our peace and our joy. The rest that Jesus gives provides freedom from the uncertainties of this life, because the Bible says, and we believe, that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28 KJV). So if you want peace, real peace, wonderful peace, come to Jesus. If you want rest, real rest, wonderful rest, come to Jesus. Many of us came to Jesus as we were, weary, worn, and sad. We found in him a resting place, and he has made us glad. Do I have any glad Christians in the room today?

The last invitation Jesus offers us in this passage is an invitation to take his yoke. A yoke was made of wood, hand-hewn to fit the neck and shoulders of the particular animal that was to wear it in order to prevent chafing. The yoke was part of the harness used to pull a cart or a plow, and was the means by which the animal's master kept it under control and guided it in useful work.

Well, what Jesus is saying to us here is, “If you take my yoke, if you come under my authority. If you come under my control and allow me to be your Master, whatever burden you are carrying, whatever heavy load you are under, I will get under the load and I will bear most of the burden—if you come to me.” Jesus is saying here, “I want to be your partner, I want to be your friend, I want to be your keeper, but you have to come to me.”

You see, Brothers and Sisters in Christ, when we yoke up with Jesus, the reason that his yoke is easy and his burden is light is because he carries most of the weight of the load and he never gives us more than we can bear.

Notice in the text that Jesus uses the word *rest* twice. In verse 28, Jesus says, “All who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Then Jesus says in verse 29, “For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” The first rest, Jesus gives; the second rest, we find. The first rest is a rest given by Jesus for this life. The second rest we find when our feet strike Zion. Oh bless the name of Jesus. The songwriter says, “There is rest beyond the river.”

Jesus is saying, “I won’t only give you rest for this life, but when this life is over, I will give you eternal rest for your souls. For when our feet strike Zion, we will be at rest because there won’t be any crying over there. God is going to wipe all tears away, so we will rest from crying. When our feet strike Zion, there won’t be any dying over there. God is going to send death to hell, so we will rest from dying. When our feet strike Zion, there won’t be any sickness over there. There is a tree that is good for the healing of the nations, so we will rest from sickness. When our feet strike Zion, there won’t be any sorrow over there. The things that make us sorrowful down here won’t cross over, so we will rest from sorrow. So Jesus has promised us not only rest in this life but also in the life to come. But in order to have his rest, you have to come. Jesus will never be arrested for breaking and entering, meaning that he will never move himself in your life without you accepting his invitation.

Most of us in this room have received an invitation to a party or some event that has the letters at the end, “R.S.V.P.” These letters stand for the French words, “Répondez, s’il vous plaît.” meaning “Respond, please.” Well, you aren’t supposed to respond just if you’re coming; you are to respond even if you are not coming. Well, Jesus has issued you a standing invitation, and he is waiting for you to respond. He already knows who is and who isn’t coming, but still he offers the invitation.

Some of you here today have tried it all, but you haven’t tried Jesus. Some of you came into 2011 struggling and you haven’t given the struggle to Jesus. I hear Jesus standing on the balcony of heaven saying, “Come to me, and I will take your struggle. Come to me, and I will take your pain. Come to me, and I will take your problems.” Jesus is saying, “If you need my help, come to me. You tried it on your own, and you didn’t do well.” I hear the words of David, who said, “O taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps 34:8 RSV). Just come to Jesus today. Give him a taste, and you will see that not only is he good, but he is um-um good.

For I can say like the psalmist, “I once was young, but now I’m old and I’ve never seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread” (Ps 37:25). I can say like the Psalmist, “When the wicked even my enemies and my foes came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell” (Ps 27:2). I can say like Isaiah “When the enemy came in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord raised up a standard against him” (Is 59:19). I can say like Isaiah again “No weapon formed against me has

prospered and every tongue that rose up to against me was condemned” (Is 54:17). You ought to come to Jesus.

If you need help, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1 RSV). You ought to come to Jesus. If you need food, God says, “And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God” (Joel 2:26 KJV). You ought to come to Jesus. You have a standing invitation to come.

And then not only do we have a standing invitation, but with that invitation we have a promise, for Galatians 6:9 says, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up” (ESV). You’ve had some storms in your life, but don’t give up in the storm, because the God we serve is the Storm Chaser. I know that you’ve had some dark days in your life, but don’t give up, because Jesus is your light and your salvation. I know you’ve had some sorrow in your life, but don’t give up, because “weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Ps 30:5). I know that you’ve had some disconnects waiting on the next paycheck, but don’t give up, because God is Jehovah Jireh, your Provider, and if you stay in the will of God, the promise is that you will reap—if you don’t give up.

You see, when we accepted the invitation to come, we also accepted what the host had to offer, and the host who is Jesus offers water that will quench our thirst and will never dry up. The host who is Jesus offers a friendship that is closer than any brother. The host who is Jesus offers to be with us when our fathers and mothers forsake us. The host who is Jesus offers not just to be enough but to be more than enough. Jesus offers to be the check in the mail, the keeper of the repo-man, our bridge over troubled water, the calmer of our crazy supervisor, the help in the time of need, the joy of our salvation, the lifter up of our heads, and everything that we need if we just accept the invitation.

Watching and Praying with Urgency

Colossians 4:2–6

By Rev. Robert Moss

Last words cause you to think about life's priorities. (*Insert illustration about memorable last words people uttered before death*). What has mattered most in life?

We seem to get confused about the meaning of certain words such as *permanent*, *temporary*, and *eternal*.

- **Permanent** = markers / permanent press / hair treatment (getting a permanent). Hair itself isn't even permanent! We call many things permanent that aren't permanent at all.
- **Temporary** = cars / homes/ bank accounts / recreational possessions. We give so much of our attention to these temporary things.
- **Eternal** = the lives of people. We too often act as if we believe that life is temporary and everything else is eternal. We reverse reality!

Let's look at what the Bible says about developing a different perspective:

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (Col 4:2–6 NIV)

1. Be a person of prayer—but pray for *the right things* (vv 2–4).

- Count the times the word *pray* or *prayer* is mentioned.
- Paul is showing us what it means to be utterly dependent upon God.
- In morning, I am “reporting for duty” when I arise. My first prayer.

a) We tend to pray for personal concerns (or church family concerns) exclusively.

There are many needs around us and many needs in our own lives. Please understand that I am not minimizing the need to pray for these things. The beloved gospel song “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” teaches us, “What needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer.” However, our prayers are not often enough for those who are far from God. Have we lost our sense of urgency for their salvation?

b) Why do we fail to pray for those who are far from God?

“If I straighten the pictures on the walls of your home, I am committing no sin, am I? But suppose that your house were a fire, and I still went calmly about straightening pictures, what would you say? Would you think me merely stupid or very wicked? The world today is on fire. What are you doing to extinguish the fire?” (Corrie ten Boom, *Amazing Love*, 101)

People who have had an arm in a cast for a lengthy period of time can tell you what happens when the plaster is finally removed. The muscles of the arm have atrophied, that is, they have shrunk and become weak because they have not been used.

That's precisely what happens to a church when its leaders don't pray: its ministry becomes powerless and ineffective. E.M. Bounds emphasized the need for a ministry of prayer within the church when he wrote, "It may be laid down as an axiom, that God needs, first of all, leaders in the church who will be first in prayer, men with whom prayer is habitual and characteristic, men who know the primacy of prayer. But even more than a habit of prayer and more than prayer being characteristic of them, church leaders are to be men whose lives are made and molded by prayer, whose heart and life are made up of prayer. These are the men—the only men—God can use in the furtherance of His kingdom and the implanting of His message in the hearts of men."

See Colossians 4:2.

2. Walk wisely before people without Christ (v 5).

- a) **Your life is under observation.** True for everyone, especially for Christians.
- b) **Recognize the opportunities.** One of the most difficult tasks in life is learning to distinguish between man's opportunities and God's opportunities.

3. Speak with grace, answering and sharing what makes your life different (v 6).

a) Learn to speak effectively.

Paul does not want the Colossians to be fearful, threatened, or isolated. He wants them to speak openly with others and gives three characteristics that should govern their speech:

1. **GRACIOUS.** Not condescending, or arrogant toward unbelievers.
2. **SALTY.** Today we think of salty speech as profane. In that context, Paul meant that Christians should be witty, amusing, clever, and humorous to prevent them from being ignored as irrelevant bores.
3. **READY.** In verse 6, Paul told the believers to be ready to give an answer for their beliefs. They should be well grounded in their faith.
4. Added note: The most influential of all educational factors is the conversation in a child's home.

b) Develop a sense of urgency.

Notice that Paul does not ask them to pray for his release from prison. Instead, he asks them to pray that the work might be even more effective.

It is one thing to generally pray "for the lost." It is quite another thing to pray for opportunities for witnessing.

Successful evangelism requires a sense of urgency. Someone once said, "The lost have been multiplying while the church has been making additions."

Illustration:

The recent health care debate created a huge sense of urgency in our nation, no matter which side of the debate you chose.

c) Know your Bible.

In Paul's world, Christianity was a new and differing teaching. Today, formerly Christian nations now have a majority who claim to be agnostics or atheists or who follow another religious faith.

Christianity is increasingly becoming an unfamiliar and strange teaching in our world. Many have become skeptical about Christians and their faith, and a few well-publicized scandals involving prominent Christians have substantiated these suspicions.

Life Application

Seize the day! Make the most of every opportunity!

In the motion picture *The Dead Poet's Society*, Robin Williams plays the role of a teacher in an exclusive Eastern prep school. On the first day of school, he takes the class of boys out into the hallway to look at the pictures of past, now dead, graduates of the school. He motivates them to learn and excel in life with the following words:

“We are food for worms, Lads! Believe it or not each and every one of us in this room one-day will stop breathing, turn cold, and die. Step forward and see these faces from the past. They were just like you are now. They believe they're destined for great things. Their eyes are full of hope. But, you see, gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils. If you listen real close, you will hear them whisper their legacy to you. Lean in. What do you hear?” Then Robin says in an eerie grave-like voice, “Carpe Diem!” (Latin for seize the day) “Seize the day boys! Make your lives extraordinary!”

That's good advice for every believer! Seize the day while you may! Colossians 4:5.

When the Fire Burns Low

Acts 12:1–19

By Rev. Robert Moss

One of the fundamental elements of Christianity is passion. When it exists, we change the world. When it wanes, we meander in mediocrity.

Passion has often been associated with fire (e.g., Acts 2). We refer to passionate Christians as being “on fire” for the Lord.

When the Lord gave Moses instructions for the burnt offering, he said:

Remember, the fire must be kept burning on the altar at all times. It must never go out.
(Leviticus 6:13 NLT)

Question: what do you do when the fire burns low?

- Wait until it burns out?
- Put more fuel on the fire?
- Blow on the embers for reigniting?

My most important job is to keep my spiritual passion hot and to preach and teach and lead in such a way as to call this congregation to be effective in God’s hands.

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. (Acts 20:28 NIV)

Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve. (1 Peter 5:2 NIV)

For this reason I decided to attend the conference on prayer in Oregon. (Talk about Jefferson Baptist Church and the spiritual power that came through prayer. Details can be found on the Internet.)

Jefferson, Oregon population is just over 3,000. Worship attendance at JBC is 1,500. They began to experience a tremendous blessing of God when they became serious about prayer.

The philosophy of the church is expressed this way:

Much prayer = much blessing
Little prayer = little blessing
No prayer = no blessing

A praying church is a powerful church,
and a powerful church is a productive church,
and a productive church is a progressive church,
and a progressive church is pregnant with unlimited potential.

We should strive to pattern ourselves after the churches of the first century. Why? Because it was the first-century church that added over three thousand souls to the kingdom of God in one day. Although the first-century church met with heavy opposition, they followed the mandates of God, and subsequently God blessed them.

A church that does not pray forfeits the blessings and power of almighty God. A powerless church does nothing to please or to glorify God. Therefore, God is not pleased when his saints fail to collectively pray.

If we endeavor to see this church soar to higher heights, we must become a praying church. If we want to see lives changed and souls saved, we must become a praying church. If we want to have an impact on the world, we must become a praying church. There is real power in a praying church.

Read Acts 12:1–19 (NIV).

Peter was arrested and incarcerated. Herod conjectured that if he killed the head of the church, the body would soon perish. And don't you know that the same mentality still exists today? But unknown to Herod, God had other plans. I like a God who can turn dead ends into detours, who can take what looks like the end of the road and turn it into a bend in the road. God is bigger than our prisons, our jail cells, and our chains.

5 Observations from the Text

1. The church was praying.
 - a. They were *earnestly* praying (v 5)
 - b. Many were gathered for prayer (v 12)
 - c. God designed the church for corporate prayer.
 - i. “For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.” (Matt 18:20 NIV)
 - ii. “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken.” (Acts 4:31 NIV)
2. Peter was trusting. He was sleeping (v 6).
3. God was working.
 - a. Peter's chains fell off (v 7).
 - b. The gate opened by itself (v 10).
4. The church was astonished.
 - a. Church didn't believe it was Peter at the door (v 15).
 - b. They were astonished (v 16).

We must continue in prayer, and when we pray, we must expect God to answer our prayer. The story is told of an old country church in the red hills of Alabama, where it was one hundred degrees in the shade. The rain had not fallen for some time. The pastor of a local church called the members together stating that they were going to

meet at the church the next day for a special prayer meeting to pray for rain. The next day they assembled together, but noticed that Sister Johnson had not arrived. They looked down the street and saw a person wearing a raincoat and boots, carrying an umbrella. They notice that it was Sister Johnson. When she reached the church, they asked her why was she wearing such clothing, to which she responded, if we are going to pray for rain, we should at least dress for rain.

5. The enemy was active. Herod executed the guards (v 19).
Herod Agrippa the first, the grandson of Herod the great, and son of Aristbulous, had vexed the church and killed James, the brother of John, with the sword. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he stretched forth his hand against Peter, a leader of the church. My brothers and sisters, there are those who do not want to see the church progress, and they will do whatever they can to hinder the agenda of the church. That's why it is imperative that the church stays in constant prayer.

Call to Action

Let's reignite the passion for prayer in our church. (Illustrate by telling about the concert of prayer experience.)

Prayer etiquette.

1. Establish prayer as a priority in your life.
2. Get involved with a prayer partner.
3. Let's pray for big things.

When Pastor Duke was about ten years old, his father, who was in the navy at the time, took him to the docks to do some fishing. A large ship was tied up there. The weather that day was particularly calm, and the ship floated on slack ropes. His father surprised him by walking over, putting his feet on the edge of the dock, his hands on the side of the ship, and pushing. He pushed steadily for a long time. Pastor Duke says, "I thought he was crazy. He was trying to move a ship! But to my amazement, the ship began to move! I thought my dad was Superman in disguise!" His father squatted down and said, "I don't know how it works, but somehow my energy is stored up in that ship until there is enough to move it. If I had quit before there was enough energy to move it, even seconds too early, it wouldn't have moved, and all my pushing would have been wasted. And guess what? If you had helped me, it would have moved twice as fast."

As we seek to make prayer essential in our church, you will be like that man pushing that ship. The more people you persuade to push with you, the sooner it will move. Don't give up before the results start to come. You never know when they're just about to happen. Keep praying. Get others to pray with you. You'll be amazed at how God moves.

Search and Rescue

Luke 15:1-6

By Rev. Donald K. Doe

It is so easy to get complacent in the one area that distinguishes us as a Christian church. It is easy to come, enjoy church, sing, fellowship, go out and eat lunch together, serve through the week, have quiet times, do all the things to grow in our faith and forget that God has a larger agenda here on earth. It is the very agenda that encompassed you, so that you became a Christian in the first place.

It has everything to do with this idea of search and rescue. It is such a simple word picture. Search to find something lost. We can all relate.

All of us love a good search and rescue story...

(Use illustration of current and relevant search and rescue)

- World Trade Center (esp. with the 10 year anniversary)
- Rescued miners.
- Favorite movie or book.

There is something about rescue scenes that captures our attention. It does something in our human spirit to see somebody lost and then found.

A good search and rescue, we find, touches God's heart as well. In fact, it touches all of heaven!

What I would like for us to see today is that at the very heart of God, at the very core of his mission, is this idea of search and rescue.

Jesus used words like *lost*, *seek*, *find*, and *save* all the time. They are key themes in his teachings and stories. Make no mistake about it, God thinks constantly about this idea of search and rescue.

While it is evident throughout Scripture, one particular chapter pulls out all stops. Luke 15 records stories that have everything to do with search and rescue. Today we look at the first.

The first two verses give a remarkable and surprising scenario to the first-century readers. Notice tax collectors and sinners are the ones drawing close to listen to Jesus.

Some background on tax collectors and the tax system: They were greedy, manipulative, bad people. The tax system was full of corruption, a system ripe for abuse. The tax collectors were thought of as traitors who had sold their soul to the Romans. People hated them, and yet Jesus is hanging out with them.

They were sinners, outcasts. Those far from God. Renegades. Rebellious. Definitely the non-church-goers.

When the religious leaders of Jesus' day saw all this, they grumbled and muttered. They were ticked! Jesus welcomes and eats with these people, which indicated to the religious leaders that he liked them and liked being with them.

It is in this setting of religious upset in response to Jesus' hanging with "these kind" that Jesus tells the first of three stories to help them understand what he was up to and ultimately what God the Father is up to in the midst of this fallen world.

Verses 3–6

1. Something of great value is lost.

Of a hundred sheep, one was lost. Now this is more than just a nice pet. This represents a person's livelihood. Each of these sheep represented an investment that would someday bring a return that would provide for the family. Each sheep would have extreme value to this shepherd.

The lost sheep more than likely wandered away, strayed, and got lost.

Now the shepherd obviously is God. The lost sheep represents humanity not in the fold. And the implication cannot be emphasized enough. That lost sheep matters! It is essential. It is missed. It is valuable! What Jesus is communicating is that you and your neighbor on both sides, and all your co-workers and everyone in your family and all your service providers and clients and customers—all of them matter to God. We have great value in the eyes of God.

All of us have an idea what it is like to be valued. No matter what kind of upbringing we may have had. Mom, dad, uncle, aunt, friend—someone, somewhere, has really cared about us. We know what it is like to be valued by another person. Take that value you feel, multiply by a trillion, and you are one small step closer to understanding how much God values you. Jesus is saying, something of great value is lost.

2. There is an all-out search for that which is lost.

The ninety-nine are left safe in the fold and the shepherd leaves to find the one (v 4). This is a definite foreshadowing of Jesus. It reminds us of Jesus' final words in Matthew 28, when he instructs the disciples "to go." The shepherd goes, and he doesn't stop until he finds.

Can you catch a glimpse of the amazing heart attitude of God? He has so much love for a fallen world that he is on an all-out search.

Peter reminds us that he is "patient toward us, not wishing any would perish but all would come to eternal life" (2 Peter 3:9).

Find them, at all cost. An all-out search is ensuing. It is God's main agenda. We must catch this vision if we are ever to understand God's heart. Oh how we get calloused to missing persons.

God is on an all-out search and rescue mission, pulling out all stops, all resources, and not stopping until he finds.

3. There is a huge celebration when what is lost is found.

How this story ends had to blow those original hearers away (vv 5–6). The shepherd searches, finds, and then places the sheep on his shoulders. He doesn't beat it for running away. He doesn't even return it to open pastures or to the pen. He brings it home! He pampers and nurtures it, healing whatever wounds it might have incurred. Then he calls friends and neighbors to join in a celebration!!

Let's be realistic. Wouldn't some neighbor say, "Are you kidding me? Sure the sheep is valuable. I know. But aren't you making a big deal out of this? We all have sheep. We all lost some. But really, a party?"

That is exactly what Jesus is trying to get across: that given the level of "lostness" and given the value attached and given what the search costs and now the lost is found and brought home. It is the most incredible news ever! It is definitely worth shouting about and celebrating. It may sound insane for a shepherd that loses one sheep out of a hundred. But it is not insane for God, even if there are more than seven billion people on earth. Each one matters.

In fact, there is more rejoicing over the one than the 99 that need not repent (Matt 18:13, 14).

What about for us? It means more for one lost person to come to Christ than...

- your making it to church every week.
- joining a small group or Bible study.
- serving in your area of ministry.
- being a responsible citizen.

Anything the ninety-nine does is all good and pleasing to God, but it doesn't hold a candle to one lost sheep coming home.

If our reaction is, "What? Isn't that a bit of an overstatement?" then we find ourselves in the same category as that first-century audience.

The simple question we must wrestle with is this: Do we share God's feelings and agenda for the lost?

God, give us your heart and your mind for the lost.
Help us to create opportunities to do your mission.
Oh Lord, bring the celebration back to your people.

Intercessory Prayer

By Rev. Jeff Perkins

How many of you know that you would not be where you are today spiritually if it had not been for at least one other person passionately praying for you? When it comes to somebody that was serious and intentional about praying for you, how many of you have a name or a face that immediately comes to mind? On the count of three shout out your name.

Praying for others is what the Bible calls intercessory prayer. Say that with me: intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer is interceding in prayer on behalf of another. I like this definition. Read it with me: intercession is one person going to another person to get something for someone else. It is the picture of a triangle.

And so today as we begin the final week of Focus 40, let the transformation begin, This is Passion Week, the week leading up to Easter Sunday, the week of the year when more people have their spiritual antennas up than any other time. I cannot think of a more opportune time for us to talk about the importance of praying for others. Here's the deal: *there is no way that you and I will ultimately experience spiritual transformation and become everything God created us to be unless we have some other people interceding for us in prayer.*

Our primary Scripture passage for this entire series has been James 5:16, which says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (NIV). We tend to focus on the second part of that verse: "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." But pay close attention to what the first part says: "confess your sins to each other" (get honest and real) and then "pray for each other so that you may be healed." The context here isn't just about physical healing; it is also about emotional and spiritual healing. It is like this: as we confess and get real about our issues, other people intercede and pray for us and we get healed. It is hard to get healed unless you get real. And it is hard to get healed by yourself, so you need some other people going to God for you. That is the power of intercessory prayer.

And I have to tell you that I am incredibly passionate about this topic today because I have personally experienced the power of intercessory prayer. If you have been around here for very long at all, you have heard me say on many occasions that there is no doubt in my mind that I would not be who I am and where I am without my mother praying for me. No matter how bad I got on drugs or alcohol, my mother never stopped praying for me. I can remember times when I would creep into the house in the middle of the night, trying to be quiet, before I spilled all my change on the wood floors or did something to wake my parents up, and I would hear my mother in the bathroom in the middle of the night with the door closed praying for me. And when I went from bad to worse, she then did the worst thing she could possibly ever do: she handed me over to the grey berets, God's army rangers, ten silver-haired women who got serious about praying for me. And then it was lights out for me. So if you are doing your thing instead of God's thing and you have some little old ladies praying for you, cash your chips in now. Give it up. You don't stand a chance!

And then I have seen the power of intercessory prayer in the lives of both of my children. I am so thrilled that both my kids have grabbed the baton of faith and are going hard for God as young adults. But I also know without a shadow of a doubt that they would not be who they are and where

they are without their mom praying and fasting for them. Kathy has fasted at least part of a day or a whole day for both kids regularly for the past eight years.

And there is no doubt in my mind that just about every single one of you in this room today has a similar story about how your life or the life of someone in your family or close to you has been touched by intercessory prayer.

But the power and importance of intercessory prayer is not limited to just your experience and my experience. The Bible is replete with stories of the power of intercessory prayer.

In the very first book of the Bible, in Genesis, we see Abraham interceding with God for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. They had sinned in such a heinous way that God was ready to wipe them out. God said, "If I find 50 I will not destroy the city." Abraham interceded and pleaded on behalf of the people...45...40...30...20..., and then in Genesis 18:32 (NIV), Abraham says, "May the LORD not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" The LORD answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

And then once again we find God fired up because the Israelites had turned to other gods, and he was ready to wipe them out. And this time it was Moses who was the intercessor going to God on behalf of the people of Israel. (Read Ex 32:11–14.)

And Peter sure understood the power of intercessory prayer, didn't he? James the leader of the Jerusalem church had already been beheaded and Peter was next. He was locked up in prison and guarded by sixteen guards. It looked like curtains for Peter. But we read in Acts 12:5, "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." The situation looked hopeless, but the people of God were going to God to get something for Peter, his release. And God performed a mighty miracle. Do you see the triangle: to God, for him, by the church?

The apostle Paul was another one who understood the importance of intercessory prayer. Like Peter he too found himself locked up in prison in Rome. And he has such a great attitude that he says, his circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel and that the most important thing is that Christ is being preached. He continues, saying, "because of this I rejoice...*for I know that through your prayers* and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance" (Phil 1:19–19 NIV). Paul says there are two factors in his deliverance: the people's prayers for him and the Spirit's help. And I tend to believe it is incredibly significant that the prayers of the people are mentioned first!

Because Paul knew firsthand the power of intercessory prayer, he is passionate about praying for others. In fact, in almost every letter he writes to a group of believers, he somewhere mentions the fact that he is praying for them.

In Romans 1:8–9, he writes, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how I *constantly* remember you in my prayers *at all times*."

And then look how he begins his letter to the Philippians: "I thank my God every time I remember you. *In all my prayers for all of you*, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will

carry it on to completion” (Phil 1:5–6 NIV, emphasis added). We love to quote verse six: “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion,” but have you ever thought about the connection with the intercessory prayers of Paul? God promises to finish what he started in your life and my life, but one of the primary reasons he will finish is because of the intercessory prayers of others on our behalf.

Isn't that precisely the point Jesus was making when he told Peter that he would be interceding and praying for him? Read with me what he says to him in Luke 22:31–32 (NIV, emphasis added): “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.” By the way, the same is true for you and the same is true for me. Satan is trying to take you out, Peter. “*But* I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Jesus was the epitome of an intercessor, and he makes it clear to Peter here that it is his intercessory prayers for him that will enable him to stay strong and fulfill the ministry God had for him.

And guess what? How many of you want to hear some great news today? In fact, what I am going to say next might be the best news you hear all day, all week. Are you ready? In the same way that Jesus prayed for Peter's faith not to fail, he is praying for your faith to remain strong—right now, this very minute.

That is what the writer of Hebrews tells us in chapter 7, verses 23–25: “Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. *Therefore* he is able to save completely those who come to God through him [he is talking about you here], because he always lives to intercede for them” (NIV).

But it gets even better than that! Not only do we have Jesus interceding for us, praying to God the Father on our behalf, but we also have the Holy Spirit praying for us! Listen to what Paul says in Romans 8:26–27 (NIV, emphasis added): “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.” *What is our weakness?* “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints [that's us] *in accordance with God's will.*” So we do not always know God's will when we pray, but God searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, and the Spirit then prays for us in accordance, in line, in agreement with God's will.

So if Jesus is praying for us and the Holy Spirit is praying for us, why do we need to pray for each other?

That is a question I have been asking myself all week. *Why is intercessory prayer so vital?* I am sure there are numerous reasons, but I have come to the conclusion that there is one at the top of the list.

Intercessory prayer is vital because spiritual battles require spiritual weapons. It is spiritual warfare. Consider what Paul says in Ephesians 6:10–12. Six times in this passage, Paul uses the word *against*. As Christians, we are against something. In other words, there is opposition. Ever wonder why going hard for God is so stinking hard? *We are in a war.* And the enemy is not your husband, wife, mother-in-law. The opposition is not flesh and blood; it is not other people. It is spiritual in nature. We have an enemy in the spiritual realm that is waging war against us. This war is waged primarily in the realm of the mind, the realm of ideas and thoughts, and the enemy is always lying to us to get us

to succumb. Paul also discusses spiritual warfare and the need for spiritual weapons in 2 Corinthians 10:3–5.

Since the warfare is spiritual, we have to use spiritual weapons. In Ephesians 6:13–17, Paul lists the spiritual armor we need to put on to do battle. So we put this armor on. Now where is the battle? Point me in the right direction. Look at verse 18: “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (NIV). This all begins in verse 14 with “Stand firm then...” That’s the command; the rest of the verses are parenthetical, until we get to verse 18: “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers.” Prayer is the battlefield. We are praying against the lies, the deceptions, the schemes.

This point is so vital that God goes to great lengths to show us a graphic example of the spiritual battle in a story found in Exodus 17. The Israelites are getting ready to fight the Amalekites in the valley of Rephidim. So Moses says to Joshua, “Choose some men and go down to the valley to fight. I will go up on the top of the mountain and hold up the rod of God” (v 9, paraphrase). *I think if I had been Josh, I would have said, “Hey Moses, I have a better idea. How ’bout you getting those men and going to the valley and I will go up on the mountain with the rod of God?”*

But Joshua followed Moses’s orders and fought the Amalekites in the valley. And Moses is up on the mountain with the rod of God. And as the two armies do battle, a strange thing happens. When Moses holds up the rod, the Israelites advance. When he lowers it, the Amalekites prevail. Moses gets tired of holding his arms up, so God has Aaron and Hur up there with him holding up his arms. *It soon became apparent to all that the real battle was on the mountain top, not in the valley, and that the victory in the valley was won by the intercession of Moses, Aaron, and Hur on the mountain top.* This principle is so vital that God ends the story by saying, in Exodus 17:14, “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.’”

It is like God is shouting “don’t forget that the battle is up there! Don’t forget the battle is in the spiritual realm, Josh. Don’t forget that the battle belongs to the LORD.” The enemy wants to take you out, and he wants to take me out. And the battle is not being fought down here with what we do and don’t do, who we hang and don’t hang with, what we buy and don’t buy. The battle is in the spiritual realm as Satan tries to influence the way you act by capturing the way you think, and we have to fight for each other through intercessory prayer. Again, that gets back to the verse in James we read earlier about knowing where we are weak and having others pray for us.

That’s why when Paul prays for believers, he prays the way he does in Ephesians 1:17–19 and 3:14–19. And when we pray for those who do not know Jesus what do we pray? Spiritual warfare (2 Cor 4:3–4). We are praying that they will see the truth. First Corinthians 2:14 says the person without Christ does not understand the things of God because they are foolishness to them. We pray that they would understand, that the truth would set them free because this is a spiritual battle and we intercede in the realm of the spirit.

So the spiritual life is a battle, and the primary weapon we use to fight this battle is intercessory prayer. I don’t know about you, but at this point I am starting to get excited thinking that God could use me and my prayers in this battle to really make a difference in my wife’s life, husband’s, kids’, pastor’s, friends’.

“God, how can I, how can we become more effective at intercession? How can we become more powerful in seeing our prayers answered on behalf of others?”

Let me make one suggestion. If you want to become really powerful in intercessory prayer, you have to assume the right position. In fact, I would go so far as to say that your position as an intercessor may be even more important than the words you actually pray.

Maybe a sports analogy will help here. If you know much about sports, you know how important position is. In basketball, it is great to be able to jump high and have great hands when it comes to rebounding, but you have to understand how to get into position. If you are out of position, it doesn't matter how high you can jump.

And in baseball, the wise fielder will know where to position himself or herself for certain batters. In fact, scouts have charts that show where certain batters hit the ball; they know where the pitcher will throw it to get them to hit it to certain spots, so they position their players accordingly. Catching and fielding and having a great arm is vital, but it doesn't help a lot if you are out of position.

The same is true when it comes to being a powerful effective intercessor. It is all about position. Turn to the person beside you and tell them, “It is all about position.” I am not talking about whether you are standing or kneeling or laying down when you pray. I am talking about your position in terms of your relationship with God and your relationship with the person or people you are praying for.

The God says it like this in Ezekiel 22:30: “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.” What God is saying here is that he is looking for someone who will assume a certain position and live a certain way.

The long and short of it is this: our position with God needs to be one of intimacy and holiness. The purer we are spiritually, the more in line and in tune we are with God; the more we align ourselves with God, the more power we have. That is one of the main points Stovall Weems makes in his book *Awakening*, and it is probably the most important thing God has shown me in Focus 40. There has to be margin and space for God. We have to “de-gunk” our lives and get all the fluff out. That is why James says, “*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*” Jesus said, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you” (John 15:7 NIV). The psalmist said, “Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desire of your heart.” The closer we are to Jesus, the more powerful our prayers will be. That's the vertical piece.

But there is also this horizontal position piece that involves our relationships with other people. And what I mean by that is that we have to engage and get close and have the ability to identify with the needs and situation of the person or people we are praying for.

Intercession is not just about what you say; it is about who you are. In Isaiah 53:12, talking about Jesus, the Bible says, “*He poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors*” (NIV). Isaiah doesn't just mean that Jesus prayed for transgressors. He lived for them and died for them. His entire life, his entire ministry, was all about intercession. In other words, he engaged people. He went where they went. He felt compassion. He

entered their world. He got sick to his stomach when he saw people missing out on God's best for their lives.

He prayed out of his position. That is what we are talking about here. So often we want to judge people, condemn people, separate ourselves from people, talk about them from a distance. And many times we pray for God to do something so our lives get easier. That is not a position that is pleasing to God.

We have to enter their world, feel what they feel, and see them from God's perspective. They are not the enemy. They are victims of the enemy. *That is why Nehemiah was such an effective intercessor.* When he heard about the distress of his brothers, he came unglued. Life could not continue business as usual. It was their plight that drove him to his knees in intercession. It was identifying with their life situation that caused him to put his own life on the line. Alan Redpath says, "You will never be moved to lighten someone else's load until you have first of all felt the pressure in your own soul."

Once we assume the proper position, we are in alignment with God and pray according to his will—we are convinced that what is best for our husband, wife, children, parents, worker, is what God has for them. And we want God's best for them so bad we can taste it. That passion, that holy discontent, causes us to pray fervently and passionately for them in intercessory prayer.

When it comes to intercessory prayer I want to be like a guy in the Bible by the name of Epaphras. He is only mentioned a couple of times, but listen to how Paul describes him in Colossians 4:12. "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. *He is always wrestling in prayer for you*, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured" (NIV, emphasis added). Wow! The word used for *wrestling* means "to struggle or fight." Epaphras was struggling and fighting and agonizing for others in intercessory prayer so they would stand firm in God."

Ronald Dunn says this, "We are never more like Jesus than when we are praying for others. Intercession is laying down our life for our friend; it is bearing one another's burdens; it is sharing in the sufferings of Christ." Jesus is interceding, the Holy Spirit is interceding, and we are to be interceding for one another.

So what is God telling you to do today? Be more serious and intentional in your praying? Your enemy is not your enemy? Do you need to take the time to really find out the issue(s) in somebody's life so you can pray more effectively? I want you to zero in and focus on a Christ-follower that God wants you to intercede for? Ask him now. Find out how to specifically pray for them. Now think of someone who is not a Christ-follower that God wants you to pray for. How does God want you to get involved in his or her life?