

EARNEST
By Senior Pastor Tom Harrison
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Matthew 9:35-38
Prayer Sermon Series

INTRODUCTION: *“Getting old ain’t for sissies”* is true. I don’t minimize the problems of aging but getting old wasn’t the concern of the early Christians. Jesus’ big three disciples are all mentioned in Acts 12:1-5. James, the brother of John, was beheaded. Peter imprisoned. What did the church do? They prayed. How did they pray? With *“earnest prayer.”*

So much of our prayer time is for the sick. That is biblical. We are told to do that. However, mortality is 100 percent. All of us die eventually. I am not cavalier about aging or death. We experience loss and grief in both. However, we must remember our mission: *Helping Others Follow Jesus*. Trouble follows when we get off mission and become earthbound rather than seeking the kingdom of God.

On the night Jesus was arrested, He prayed earnestly in Gethsemane that this cup could pass from Him (Mark 14:32-42). Paul gave the Ephesians great instructions on prayer: *“praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me ...”* (Ephesians 6:18-19). He told the Thessalonians: *“... we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith ...”* (1 Thessalonians 3:10). James describes how Elijah was a righteous man who prayed fervently, with the admonition to us to do the same. The writer of Hebrews (6:11-12) has an application for us too: *“And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”*

APPLICATION: Who are you earnestly praying will come to Christ? Family members? Friends? Neighbors? Acquaintances? Kids and students? Remember to pray for the persecuted church. Practice what Paul wrote to Timothy: *“... I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

Matthew 9:35-38 *And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every*

disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

JESUS went throughout all the cities and villages – He went to people. He walked around. (Like John Wesley and Francis Asbury in the early days of Methodism) Go! Jesus also went to cities (big) and villages (small). Humility.

Jesus related to 2 audiences

CROWDS: v 35 What He **DID:** teaching/preaching/healing. The word for “healing” is the word we get for “therapeutic.” His heart went out to them. He did so out of compassion (“with passion”). Jesus suffered with people, so He was in mission to help them. He wanted to relive every problem. The crowds were “harassed and helpless.” They were worried, scared – barely making it. They remind me of those holding cardboard signs, “Anything helps.”

DISCIPLES: v 37 What he **SAID:** *“therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”* “We’ve work to do. It’s harvest time.” The task seems overwhelming. There is so much pain and so few workers. Jesus’ prayer uses the word to “cast out” or to “thrust out.” It is the word used in talking about casting out demons. Jesus does NOT pray that God finds the workers. Workers exist. He asks God to cast them out into the mission field. We don’t need to pray that those who ARE Christians go missional. Mission begins with God’s love filling our hearts and us developing compassion for others. Then we teach, preach, heal with compassion.

JESUS modeled **earnest** prayer:

1.) **PERSEVERANCE.** Jesus often told His disciples to persevere in prayer. Don’t give up. If we are earnest we are committed, dedicated, & persistent. If we do not keep praying, we probably aren’t serious about it. We return to God repeatedly and pray when we really want something. Continual.

This is Holy Week. Thursday night after supper, Jesus returned to Gethsemane (pictures). Luke 22:39-46 *And he came out and went, **as was his custom**, (Prayer was Jesus’ #1 Habit) to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."*

John 18:1-2 *When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron Valley, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for **Jesus often met there with his disciples.***

2.) **PASSION.** *And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed **more earnestly**; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation."* "Earnestly" is a compound word in Greek with 2 parts. The first means "out;" the second part means "stretched." "Outstretched" is the idea behind our English word for tension. It means deeply or fervently. It means to beg. The image is focused/passionate prayer - coming to God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength saying, "God, I mean business! I want what I'm asking of You; I'm not just going through the motions." With outstretched hearts we say, "God, hear our cry."

EARLY CHURCH: Earnest Together The early church was united in earnestness. They believed prayer was the most powerful force on the earth. They were unified and in one accord. A quick review of Acts shows an amazing consistency of prayer:

Acts 1: Jesus told His disciples to wait and to pray. They did that: *All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer* (v 14)

Acts 2: The early church began at a prayer meeting. Pentecost came while they were together praying.

Acts 2 ends: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* (v 42) The church grew.

Acts 3: The first miracle happened when Peter and John were on their way to the Temple to pray.

Acts 4: Peter and John were beaten, thrown into prison, and released. *And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.* (v 31)

Acts 6: The church had problems with their food distribution. Some Jewish believers spoke Aramaic and they got more food than the Jewish Christians who spoke Greek. They complained. The church structure had to be clarified:

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote

ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (v 3-4) Stephen and six others were selected as deacons to run the ministry. The food distribution was very important, but that was not the ultimate purpose of the church nor was it the role of the elders.

Acts 7: As Stephen, the first martyr, was being killed, he prayed: *And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.* (v60)

Acts 10 The first Gentile to believe was Cornelius. *At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.* (v 1-2)

Acts 10 When God revealed Himself to Peter in chapter 10, he was praying. *The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray.* (v 9)

Acts 12:1-11 *About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So, Peter was kept in prison, but **earnest prayer for him was made to God** by the church. Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." Sounds like an impossible situation, doesn't it? Imagine being a brand-new, multiplying church with the entire Roman army against you, and 16 soldiers surrounding your leader-who happens also to be in chains.*

How did this church respond in Acts 12? They didn't have armies or weapons. They had an impossible situation. Their beloved leader was in prison. They prayed earnestly to God. And the church prayed **"to God."** They knew the One to whom they were praying - His authority, great compassion, love, and power.

Prayer will not solve all our problems. We will always have problems. The early church faced problems. Remember what Paul wrote: Rom 8:35-39 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."* Prayer is not a silver bullet that will solve all our problems, but it will align us with the One who is the Alpha/Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the resurrection and the life, the good shepherd, the true vine, the light of the world. Continue with Romans 8: *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* God is in control. We align with Him. When we are in the grip of His grace, we become people of supreme confidence – not in ourselves, not in our circumstances, but in Christ. This gives us confidence.