



## Prayer (Part 1) – A Call to Prayer

Beau Hughes – January 4, 2015

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Happy New Year. It's good to see you. Welcome back. Some of you have been gone. Glad to see you. Glad you're back and made it all in one piece. Hope the holidays have been refreshing for you. Even yesterday was just a little gift after those rainy, cold days. What a beatdown that was. It just felt like I was in Portland all over again. Where's John? John brags about Portland, Oregon, all the time. It's great, except when it's not and it has weather like we've had the last few days, cold and wet.

I'm just grateful to be gathered. If you have a Bible, why don't you turn to Luke? Chapter 17 is where we're going to be. Just to forewarn you, it's going to take me a little bit longer to get there than it typically does because there's a lot to frame up. This being the first Sunday of the year, it's always a significant Sunday, as every Sunday is, but in a unique way, just because so many things really get kick-started for us as a congregation on this first Sunday each year.

So I want to explain that to those of you who don't know what I'm talking about, if this is your first Sunday of the year to be with us, and then for those of you, of course, who have been here for many years, just to remind you of why this is such a significant Sunday. Before I get into that too much, how many of you would be brave enough to say and just admit you made your New Year's resolutions?

Statistically... Dan Neal, thank you. He's an elder over here leading the way. I mean, this is the statistic: 45 percent of our fellow countrymen are making and have made New Year's resolutions this year. It's an amazing thing. The University of Scranton has done this massive research about it, that 45 percent of Americans make New Year's resolutions. I don't know if that's surprising to you or not.

What's probably not surprising is only 8 percent actually follow through, and so I was digging around this week. Here are the top 10 New Year's resolutions that have been made by those of you who made them and didn't raise your hand a while ago. That's fine. We'll keep confessing as we

walk through the service, but then others who have made resolutions, here are the top 10 they've made. I just want to walk through this list. Some of them are just not surprising.

1. *Lose weight.* That's typically what I think of. It's like that's *the* New Year's resolution of resolutions, it seems. Although I saw a comparative study in 1945. That was actually on the end of the list, which is interesting as you want to study culture about where we're going based on New Year's resolutions.

2. *Getting organized.* That was shocking to me. This many people are that burdened about their disorganization? I didn't know that. Maybe I don't know what world I'm living in. Apparently, we are disorganized as a country and we're deeply discouraged about our disorganization and we're resolving to get better, which I guess is job security for The Container Store. It's good news over here for some of our members who work there.

3. *Spend less, save more.* That's not a surprise.

4. *Enjoy life to the fullest.*

5. *Staying fit and healthy.* Which I guess is different than losing weight in the way they categorized it.

6. *Learn something exciting.* I don't even know what that means. "I am resolved this year, and 2015 is the year I'm going to learn something exciting." That's good for a lot of people, I guess.

7. *Quit smoking.*

8. *Help others in their dreams.* It kind of felt like that was just kind of the one they threw in there just to say, "I'm going to think about other people. I want to help people with their dreams."

9. *Fall in love.* Which makes sense, depending on how they categorize it. I don't know how you... How do you follow through on that resolution? How do you will that to happen? I guess you do, and that's where crazy comes in. How does that work for you? "So I'm resolved to fall in love."

10. *Spend more time with family.*

It's interesting. You could probably find all sorts of articles about this. People have done tons and tons of scholarly research on New Year's resolutions, and yet there's still a lack of clarity despite all we know about where New Year's resolutions actually come from, what the genesis of the New Year's resolution really was, that 45 percent of the country is making them, but why? Where did that start? Why did that start?

We don't know that, and yet there are some theories out there. One I read, which is really interesting, was from the *Huffington Post*. It sort of detailed this. The theory is our resolutions are really a secularized form of something the church used to practice called *watch night services*. The article explained this.

It says, "In a classic review for the *Oxford Journal's Social Forces*, sociologist Isidor Thorner argued in 1951 that setting resolutions at the beginning of the new year is a legacy from our Protestant forbears, and that they now function as a weakened, secularized version of what used to be 'an earlier religious attitude of life-long emotional discipline [by our Christian forebears].'"

"Thorner hypothesized that secular New Year's Resolutions may be a tradition rooted in watch night services, which were popularized by the Methodist church in 18th century England..." That's John Wesley. "...as a way to ring in the New Year in a more spiritual, contemplative way, as opposed to raucous, all-night partying."

The idea, being John Wesley's, said, "Okay, hey, listen." If it was really with him. "We're going to have these services, typically at midnight on New Year's Eve. Instead of partying and doing what we do over here on Fry Street or wherever, what we're going to do to celebrate New Year's is we're going to enter it with sobriety and hopefulness to think about the Lord."

It's interesting. Even in the African-American church, I read this week, watch night services have particular significance because at least one strand of history talks about how many of the slaves were said to have gathered in churches on New Year's Eve in 1862 to await news and confirmation of the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln, which was to go in force on January 1.

So this idea that the church has waited on New Year's Eve for something and been excited about giving their hearts afresh to the Lord is what this article is saying. The services were a chance to reflect for the church on the past year and make spiritual resolutions for the coming year. That

might be the genesis of New Year's resolutions. Interesting theory. What does it have to do with us today, the first Sunday of 2015?

We don't as a church that I know of, and I sit in a lot of rooms... I have the opportunity and the privilege to sit in most every room that there are meetings going on. We don't make New Year's resolutions as a church. We've never sort of published those and said, "Okay, church. A few of us have gotten together. Here are our resolutions as a church."

We certainly don't have watch night services at midnight. I was in bed at 9:30 on Wednesday...and most days. We don't, on New Year's Eve, get together at midnight or any night, and I don't see that in the foreseeable future. What we do practice and have practiced for the last few years as a church each year is setting aside the entire month of January to discipline our hearts to do what this article talked about our Protestant forebears used to do.

So we've not set aside a night where we're getting together at midnight, but what we've done is said, "Instead of doing that, let's set aside January as a church to do the same thing. We want to do what our brothers and sisters used to do with their watch night services, but let's just spread it out over the entire month," and this is what we've done.

This is what we're doing this month, and we've called it "A Month of Prayer." The reality is humans thrive in routine. We tend as humans to struggle without one. All you need for proof of that is holiday traveling with young children to recognize that's true. If you can remember that... If you haven't had children...

Even if you can think about the way when people fall into unemployment, how devastating that can be. One of the reasons it's devastating is they're suddenly without a routine. They've been living in a routine, and now they don't have one. They have nothing to wake up and go do, and it really messes with the psyche, which is why a lot of people who struggle or who fall into unemployment will actually keep a calendar. They'll keep a routine.

They'll set meetings on their calendar just so they'll have something to do and they won't just be sitting there without any sort of rhythm, without any sort of routine that'll get them all out of whack emotionally, mentally, spiritually. Of course, even studies have been done on children that routines form cognitive, emotional, social, strength and health in children, and healthy routines and rhythms affect our hearts, our lives.

Of course, it's the same way with the church, I think. I'm not alone here, because the church has always believed this. The church has always understood the rhythms in the life of the church are just as important as the rhythms in our personal lives. Historically, Christians have seen the calendar January, February, March, these 365 days that make up 12 months...

Christians in the church have historically seen that as one of the greatest tools we have to be formed into disciples. They've taken the calendar, and what they've done is they've organized the calendar in the life of their congregations in such ways that throughout the year they're actually using the months and the days to form themselves to remember and really engage throughout the year in the story of the Christian faith, in rich and deep and memorable ways. That's historically what the church has done.

For the last few years, what we've tried to do as a congregation is join with the wisdom of our brothers and sisters of ages past and do something similar. We've tried to create a rhythm from the calendar. The rhythm goes something like we'll start... Really, if you start in the fall, most of us operate, a lot of us, especially in Denton, which is such a town that operates on semesters, we think about the fall as really the beginning.

We'll have a fall sermon series, and then we'll move into Advent. Then we'll move into, after Advent, what we call a season of prayer in January here. Then, of course, you keep moving through the spring, and then you hit Lent and Easter. Then we move into a summer series, and that takes us right back around to the fall. Then we're in Advent once again, and then we're into a season of prayer.

That has kind of been the rhythm. If you've been here, you just think about this fall we had a sermon series. The sermon series was *A Beautiful Design*, and in the last four or five weeks we've just obviously gotten through with Advent. So here we are January 1 moving into the next season in the life of our church we've set aside for a specific purpose, the season of prayer.

January is the time where we unite our hearts and we begin our new year together over the entire month asking God to renew our faith in our lives for his service. This first sermon of January every year is just entitled *A Call to Prayer*, and we remind ourselves, "Okay, God has given us another year together. He has brought us through, as we prayed last week, another year, and he has given us

another day, another year together as a congregation, and so let's begin that year in the posture of prayerfulness, humbled before the Lord."

That's what we're going to do in January, and we're going to do it Wednesday night. I hope you can come. Then Sundays in a unique way this month we're going to take portions of the service after we talk about the specific topics, and we're going to pray about that. That is something else about January that's unique, because we pray generally.

We want to be a prayerful church generally, but then what we do in January is we also get specific with our prayers. We're praying specifically for the same topics each year. Although our prayerful dependence is something we want generally to be all the time, there are particular areas of ministry God has burdened our heart for as a church.

If you're new, this is a great day for you to be here, because I just want to share with you what some of those particular passions of ministry and ministry expression are for our church. The thing is every true church shares a common mission. We can have our mission statements and have our core values and all that.

Every true local church in Denton has the same mission. We may say it a little differently. Our graphics may be a little this or a little that. It's the same mission: to make disciples of all nations. That's what we're called to as God's people. It's to love our God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to seek the welfare of our city and of our world. That's the mission of every true local church. We're not all that different.

Yet every true church also has unique ways they live that mission out together. They have unique ministry passions they focus on. I would even just add each church focuses on these unique areas to the neglect of some other good things they could focus on. Any church that tries to focus on everything will ultimately end up focusing on nothing.

No church can do everything. No church can have every single little nuance of ministry expression as their passion and do all of those things well. Every local church with this broad, same mission they're unified in has unique ways they express that mission. They have unique priorities in making disciples.

In the hopes our church would actually be more fruitful and focused, we've made the decision as well to focus on specific priorities as we go about making disciples. Out of all the wonderful ministry endeavors we could pursue, and really the topics of ministry endeavors we could pursue, at this point as a church we've chosen four. This is kind of underneath that broad category, and those are the four we're going to talk about this month. So I just want to remind you of what those are.

1. *The nations.* Again, that's pretty general, but more specifically as a church, what we've made and are increasingly making a ministry priority, is reaching the unreached and praying for and remembering, even like we did this morning, the persecuted church around the world. There are the nations. We care about the nations. Every true church cares about the nations. They should if they're a true church. They have to by definition if they're a true church.

What we're saying is we care about all nations, but specifically we want to see the gospel preached in nations where it has never been preached, right now where people who are of that ethnicity have never heard the gospel. They don't even know what we're talking about. The name of Jesus isn't even in their language yet, as some of our missionaries from the field have recounted who are working in these places.

Even our elders have been studying over the Christmas break how to go about doing that. We're going to meet this Friday and Saturday mornings. We're going to prayerfully begin a discussion about how we can be better as a church, how we can more strategically lead our congregation into praying for and reaching and playing our part in reaching the unreached places.

2. *Sanctity of life.* We think about sanctity of life. We talk about sanctity of life. From conception to death, we want to be a church that is marked by taking seriously the image of God and the sanctity of human life in every person. More specifically, we're committed to pursuing justice for the unborn and the born, especially those who are born who are poor and those who are born who are orphans through adoption and caring for orphans.

This is something we think about, we pray about. Increasingly, as we move forward, we're hoping God would mark us by a care for the poor and for the marginalized and the orphan as well as a continued fighting for justice for those who are not born. You have the nations. You have sanctity of life.

3. *Racial harmony and racial reconciliation.* If you've been here any time at all, you'd know about that. We've talked a lot about that this year, for good reason, I think. Something we are really passionate about is seeing God's people be one in a way that says something true about God to the world that is not one in any way in any nation.

We can talk about the racism in our nation, but there's racism in every nation. We'll talk about this in the sermon next week, but the reality is racial tension, racial prejudices, racial divisions still permeate our nation, still permeate our churches, even our own hearts. So we want to talk about that.

We want to pray God would put that away from us, and we want him to make us a people where the world, our city, can look in and go, "Wow. There is hope for peoples becoming one, but it's only found in Jesus Christ." There's a witness of that pointing forward here in our city, and it's this little church that meets on this little corner. So we talk about racial reconciliation and racial harmony.

4. *College campuses.* The one we're adding to a focus this year the other campuses aren't adding and won't probably add is a unique focus we've had actually for seven plus years as a campus, and that's praying about and thinking about and reaching the college campuses here in our city.

If you read the history of Grace Temple, Grace Temple Baptist Church, which became The Village Church here in Denton, 65 years ago when they were planted on this corner, there has been a sense since that day there's a calling and an opportunity and a stewardship of this congregation to reach and serve the college campuses in this city for the gospel.

We are fiercely committed as a church to equipping and discipling and sending out the hundreds of college students who currently are a part of our congregation. They don't just even come on Sunday. They're members of our church, hundreds of them. Then even more so, or alongside that, we're committed to reaching the tens of thousands who are still dead in their trespasses and sins who are on the college campuses in our city.

So we think about and talk about and pray about and engage in the work of reaching the college campuses. Church, these are just four things that are specific that we focus on each year. When we're praying, when we enter January as a month of prayer, these are the things we're talking about.

Listen. As we move forward increasingly, these are things we want to talk and pray about often, but even more than that, we want to filter our budget through, we want to work and pray toward together as a church, as we gather here, as we gather in our home groups, as you go about your daily life of faith and where God has you.

These are ideas and ministry priorities you would increasingly take ownership of as well, that it's not just the elders and me going, "Hey, this is what we deem important," but as God unified us that we would increasingly see these things as, "Yes, these are specific things underneath the banner of the primary mission God has given us to make disciples that we want to be about as we do that."

So at the beginning of the year, we set aside sermons to talk about these specific things. That's what we'll do the next month. We'll talk about racial harmony, racial reconciliation next week. The following week Michael Oh from Japan will come, and he'll talk about the nations. The following week after that Matt will talk about sanctity of life. Then the last week after that I'll talk about the college campus.

That is specifically what January has been about. At the same time *this* January, church, is loaded with significance for us as a campus for an additional reason, because it marks really the beginning of the downhill stretch of us transitioning from a campus to a new local church. If you can just think about this, today really marks in many ways the beginning of the end of us being a campus.

As many of you, I hope most of you, know since we voted in May, 97 percent of, "Yes, this is where the Lord is leading us as a church," the elders have been tirelessly working on the transition behind the scenes. The train has already left the station, just not in a really visible way, but in every way you can imagine organizationally, financially, legally. The elders are doing everything they can to get us ready to be a new local church.

Yet today is a unique turning point because today marks the start of the most visible aspect of our transition of the church, and that's the preaching. If you're new here and if you've joined us over the last months, for the last seven years the primary teacher of our congregation has been one of our pastors who lives and works down at Flower Mound named Matt. He has done most of the preaching.

Most of the time, I think he has been here two or three times in person, but most of the time he preaches on a video from our Flower Mound Campus. He has served us so well over the last seven

years as he has walked in that role. This fall we began the transition where he was preaching less, but then really from today to June... Matt is going to go on sabbatical for eight weeks in June. He'll be back one week. He'll preach about us to all the campuses, and then the next week is when we launch as a church.

From now until June when he goes on sabbatical, he's preaching seven more times to our church. That's the preaching schedule. We'll talk about it at the member meeting on Wednesday. We'll hand that out. This transition really accelerates in the most visible aspect of it starting today. So January is significant in that as well for us. There's much for us to be prayerful about.

Even as we continue this transition and even now begin as a church to feel it in more visible ways as we've highlighted and celebrated along the way, and we'll continue to, God has been so faithful every step of the way to profoundly unite us and lead us so clearly, to provide for us. We just trust he'll do that.

We enter into this season of prayer this year together with great anticipation, with great hope, with great things we can't accomplish on our own, that we're asking God to accomplish in his sovereignty and in his greatness. So what we want to do is just look at a Scripture that would encourage us as we begin this season of prayer.

If you're in Luke 17, let's look together. Before we do that actually, let's just pray. This is where we are. Let's now ask God as we look at his Word just to instruct us and tell us and help us see what Luke 17 and 18 has to do with everything I just said and where we are together as a congregation, because it has a lot to do with it and there's a lot for us to receive from the Lord by his Spirit.

Father, we take a deep breath now and are just very hopeful as we begin a new year together as a church that you, as you have been so faithful over thousands of years to do with your people, would lead us into faithfulness, that we would do exactly what you have called us and asked us to do as a congregation.

We come to you now and ask as we intend to really posture ourselves and humble ourselves before you like we do every year this month that you would teach us how to pray. Teach us how to pray as a church, not just personally, but as a congregation. Teach us how to expect and hope and wait faithfully for you in prayer, God, and align our hearts with your heart. We pray about these things we'll talk about, think about, pray about always, but especially in a unique way this month.

So as Josh already prayed, we thank you for your Word, that you've preserved this for us, this Bible we have. You've made it possible for us to have it this morning so we can actually hear your heart and your instruction. We pray that you would help us to do that. Give us ears to do that together, we pray. In Christ's name, amen.

How many of you were here last week? Just raise your hand. I know many were still out of town. This is not to shame you. I'm just wondering. Last week if you weren't here, what Matt did was he sort of capstoned the season of Advent by talking about the second return of Christ. So I wanted to piggyback off of that a little bit and think through together how what he talked about last week, about the return of Christ, the second advent of Christ, we're waiting between the advents here, really should encourage us and exhort us in our prayerfulness in this month of prayer together.

So the posture God wants us to have as his people as we're waiting for the second advent is I think what Jesus touches on here in this text. Let's read Luke 17. Starting in verse 20 is where we're going to be. What we're going to see is one of the primary postures God expects and invites us into as his church as we wait for the return of his Son: to be a people praying together. This is what it says in Luke, chapter 17, verse 20.

**"Being asked by the Pharisees..."** These religious leaders come up. They ask Jesus another question, which typically doesn't go well for them. **"Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come..."** The kingdom of God being the rule and reign of God, the visible rule and reign of God. When is that kingdom going to come? They're oppressed by Rome. They're waiting for the Messiah. When's the kingdom going to come?

**"[Jesus] answered them, 'The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'"** In other words, "The rule and the reign of God is already here because I am the King, and I've brought the rule and reign of God with me. What do you think all these healings are about? What do you think all these sermons are about? The kingdom of God is in your midst."

What he's basically doing to the Pharisees is saying, "Hey, you're looking for this sort of ambiguous thing. I'm right here. Why don't you put your faith in and follow me?" That's what he's saying. It's a very active invitation he responds to them. He says, "The kingdom of God is here in your midst." Then he turns to his disciples in verse 22, and he says something really interesting. He starts talking

about what's going to happen, though, when he returns and the kingdom comes fully on earth as it is in heaven in that day we talked about last week.

**"And he said to the disciples, 'The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.'" In other words, where we're waiting, longing for Jesus to return, he's saying to his disciples, "That day is coming. You'll long for the return, and you'll not see it."**

**"And they will say to you..."** Just like Peter talked about. **"'Look, there!' or 'Look, here!' Do not go out or follow them."** Jesus says, **"For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day."** In other words, don't worry about that. Don't be on the edge of your seat trying to follow after these people who are putting the months and the days and the weeks...

Nobody knows when Jesus is going to return. Jesus said, "I don't even know." It's crazy that we think we can read things and we can piece it together what the Son of Man said is reserved for the Father. Those conversations are so unfruitful. So Jesus is saying, "Don't give yourself over to that unfruitful sort of forecasting." He says, in other words, "Just pay attention to me and keep your eye on me."

He says, **"For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky...so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation."** Then as we talked about last week, Jesus says, **"Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all."**

**Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed."** Suddenly, when we're not expecting it.

**"On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot's wife."** Lot's wife, who turned back on the day of judgment of Sodom and lost her life for it. Jesus

says, **"Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life..."** In other words, whoever follows him in faith and gives their life to him. **"...will keep it."**

Jesus says, **"I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together."** Working in the kitchen. **"One will be taken and the other left.' And they said to him, 'Where, Lord?' He said to them, 'Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.'"**

In other words, they're asking still, "When? Where is that going to happen?" Jesus says it's going to be obvious. Just as it's obvious when you're driving to your family's house in West Texas and there's a corpse there because the buzzards are surrounding, that's how obvious the return of the Son of God is going to be.

Jesus is saying, "I'm going to return," like we talked about last week, but he's intent on preparing his disciples, preparing his church, even preparing you and me to persevere until that day. That's what this is about, but how? Jesus, in classic sort of Jesus fashion here, tells his disciples a parable to encourage them about how they are to persevere until the day he returns.

Until that obvious day when the Son of Man comes, what'll we do? How do we persevere? How do we be faithful between the advents? What Jesus tells them, amazingly, is they ought to pray. Prayer is one of the gifts God has left us and given us to persevere and to wait for the return of Christ in this crooked world faithfully.

Prayer is a gift and an invitation. Jesus tells his friends they ought to pray for his kingdom to come and his will to be done until he returns. This parable he gives them is a really popular parable. We typically think about it in terms of personal prayer about a number of good things we pray about, which it can apply to that, no doubt.

The context he's saying here is, "We're waiting on the return of Jesus. We're longing for the injustice of the world to be made right. We're longing for God's will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven, and we're waiting for that day." So he told them a parable in verse 1 to help them, to help me, to help you.

He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray until he returns and not lose heart. That's an amazing sentence as we think about a season of prayer together and as we think

about persevering together as a church, because, first, what Jesus is telling them in this parable is he's warning his disciples that once he leaves and before he returns things are going to get hard.

That's implicit in what he's saying, and I take that from the end of verse 1. They ought to pray. Why? So they wouldn't lose heart. Why would they lose heart? Because it's difficult. They're going to want to give up. They're going to want to punt their faith. So Jesus is saying, "Listen. I'm giving you prayer because you're going to be tempted to lose heart, to give up, to despair."

Of course, that's still the case for us, is it not? Trying to persevere in faith through a fallen world sometimes leaves you feeling a lot like a commute does, does it not? How many of you are commuters? I mean like over a 45-minute commute. God bless you. It's horrible. You may have found some sort of strategy, and maybe you're just tougher than I am.

I did a wedding on Friday night. A couple of our members got married, Matt Peters and now Tori Peters. Roy and I were driving. If Roy hadn't been there, I would've gone outside of my mind. We're driving down 35W. It's just crazy. There's one highway going in and out. There has always been.

I was going down. It was raining. It was cold. There were all sorts of people on the highway. Roy and I were talking, because that helps. It reminded me of the commute I used to have to make in Portland when I was going to school. I was working full time. I was taking 18 hours of school in my last semester, and I was driving an hour one way in Portland where it's dark and cold and rainy for five months out of the year.

I was just reminded of that, and by the time we got down to the YWCA in Downtown Fort Worth at 4:00 or 5:00, I was just so beat down, from one drive. I was exhausted. People literally lose their minds on a commute. You lose your soul too, do you not? It's crazy. I read an article this week where the Brits are just giving up on the commute. All of them are just working from home.

There's a massive article about this migration, that they're just all quitting on the commute, and I think there's something there we can sort of draw out for what Jesus is saying, because everyone one of us is five minutes away, as righteous as we think we are, from quitting on our faith right now. You're one phone call away, I'm one phone call away from quitting, from giving up, because that's the world we live in.

It's hard even for us in the West who it's not as hard in different ways. It's difficult. Living the life of faith is difficult, and it tempts us to give up. The darkness is overwhelming in the world and in our own hearts. Learning about our brothers and sisters being persecuted and killed and murdered for their faith is overwhelming if we'd stop to think about it, if we'd stop to think about the 15 million brothers and sisters in India who, even this morning I was reading an article, are in the lowest class of the caste system in India.

Now what the government is saying is, "The only way we'll provide for you, as if we provide much for you anyway, is if you convert back to Hinduism. Unless you do, you get nothing." Fifteen million of our brothers and sisters. It's overwhelming. The racial scars of our nation, it's overwhelming. The unborn children who are murdered. The amount of orphans.

All of it, if we'd just look it in the face, which is really hard to do... You have to be careful when you do that. You have to do that with other people, because it is so overwhelming. If we'd look it in the face, it's overwhelming, and Jesus knows that. This is why this is here, that you ought to pray so you don't give up.

We need to pray. I know we think about prayer as something God wants us to do. "I know I should be praying. God wants us to." That's fine. It's not untrue, but *we* need to pray is what I want you to see in this text. We need to pray, because there's something mysterious God has provided us in prayer, something beautiful he has given us in prayer that helps us not give up.

It causes us to persevere in our faith, and that's what we learn from these instructions. One of the reasons we pray is if we don't we'll give up. Praying together causes us to not lose heart. It guards us from not losing heart. Corporate prayerfulness does that. I think one of the problems, though, and one of the reasons we struggle to pray. We don't think of prayer in these terms.

Primarily, that's why prayer is... When we think of prayer, we typically think of personal prayer, that, "I'm coming to God personally for my personal desires and needs." Prayer is gloriously that. We have a good Father who likes to give good gifts to his children, and he gives us daily bread. We're commanded and instructed to pray for that, but that's typically the only way we think about prayer.

The type of prayer Jesus is talking about here is not just the private prayer. He's talking to the community of faith in saying to his disciples, "You ought to pray together as a people." The problem

with thinking of prayer in just individualistic terms is it so often slides and transforms prayer, even if subtly, into only a means to get God to give us our stuff we want and not to advocate his mission or to cause us to persevere and sustain in our faith.

Pastor John Piper used to pastor in Minnesota. He's an author. In his book on world missions, he said this about prayer. He said, "Life is war. That's not all it is. But it is always that. Our weakness in prayer is owing largely to our neglect of this truth [that life is war]. Prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief."

That's the type of prayer Jesus is talking about. "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven until you return." That's what Piper is saying. He said, "It is not surprising that prayer malfunctions..." That we struggle with it. "...when we try to make it a domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts in the den." Really subtly that happens where, as good as it is to come to God personally to ask for what we need, which is what we should do and exemplify... It's proud not to do. You're proud if you don't do that, personally.

What this is saying, what Jesus is saying, is prayer is given primarily, though, to advance the kingdom, to cause us to persevere for the wartime we live in. Prayer is meant to help us finish the commute. That's what he has given it to us for. So it's a gift God gives us. In his providence he has designed our prayers to protect and sustain our faith.

So Jesus is saying here to his disciples, "Listen. Until I return, which is going to be obvious when I do that... You don't have to worry about it. It's going to be obvious when I come back. Until I return and make everything that's crooked straight..." Everything we're going to talk about this month is crooked. He's going to make straight. He's saying, "Until I do, don't lose heart. Don't give up. Foster hope. Foster faith. Foster perseverance as my disciples through persistent prayer together."

Friends, what Jesus says right here I believe, as Luke records later in the book of Acts, is one of the reasons, one of the pictures, the church had in their mind as they gathered and organized their new life together. The Scripture says in Acts 2 one of the things they were devoted to was...what? Prayer. This kind of prayer. They have this picture, this parable in their mind that Jesus is about to tell them. This is what he says in the parable in Luke, chapter 18, verse 2.

**"In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man."** So this is an unrighteous judge who doesn't love God or love people, which is the summary of what God wants for us. That's what it just said. **"And there was a widow..."** So there's an unrighteous judge, and there's a widow. A widow would just sort of exemplify a poor, unimportant outcast in the city.

**"...who kept coming to [the judge] and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.'"** So what's she saying? It's important because what she's saying is what Jesus is going to encourage us to say. What's she saying? "Give me justice. Make things right." This woman who has no rights legally is coming before this judge, and she's saying, "Just make things right. I'm not asking you for something that is out of whack here. I'm just asking you to make things right."

This is her pleading before the judge. Verse 4: **"For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said..."**

Jesus said to his disciples in verse 7, "Hear what the unrighteous judge just said. Hear that. If an unloving and unrighteous judge will do this, will not God, who is a righteous and loving Judge and Father, give justice to his elect? Will not God make things right for his sons and daughters? If this unrighteous judge does this to this widow, what will a righteous and loving Judge and Father do for his children, for his elect? If this is true in this case, how much more true is it this is the way God will respond to our prayers, to those who cry to God day and night? Will he delay long?"

This is what we talked about from 2 Peter last week. "Will God delay long? Will he be slow or drag his feet in responding to his people?" The answer is no he won't. He says, "I tell you, he will give justice to his children, to those who are his elect, speedily." Of course, the tension comes in with what speedily means to us, and what it means to a God who is patient and doesn't want anyone to perish. That's what we talked about last week in 2 Peter.

Here's the encouragement. "Hey, don't lose heart. Come to your Father in prayer and know he is going to respond to you. Believe he's going to respond to you. It's so sure." Jesus is saying, "That is a foregone conclusion, that God hears you. He will hear you. He will sustain you. He will help you." At the very end of the parable, Jesus turns it and says, **"Nevertheless..."** Here's the real question. **"...when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"**

In Jesus' mind as we're seeking to persevere and we're talking about prayer here, the real vital question is not whether or not God will respond to our prayers and help us cross that finish line. Jesus is saying, "That's a sure thing, but the real question is whether there will be faithful people who have persisted in prayer and not lost hope when the Son of Man comes."

In one of the commentaries I read this week, Trent Butler said the problem is not with God. As we look out at our world, as we look out at the darkness... I have this quote I think for you to read. He says the problem is not with God. God will answer when you need it. You can count on that. The problem is with us.

When Christ returns, will there be anyone here who calls out in faith day and night like Jesus talks about in this parable? Will we become so lackadaisical in our faith we allow people of persistent prayer to become extinct? Will the second coming of Jesus find us persisting in prayer that his kingdom will come, or will it find us trapped on the housetop trying to desperately get back into the house to find the possessions we rely on more than we do God?

That's the question left in this parable. Church, January is a month we together set aside the time to remind and encourage ourselves of how we want to answer this question as a church. We want to be those whom when Jesus returns he finds faithful, if he comes during this generation. So we're resetting our hearts on what it means to be these types of people.

Neither we nor anyone else knows when Jesus is coming. It's sure as the day, but compelled by his promise to return, compelled by our proclivity to lose heart and to give up on our faith and our longing for his salvation to come and his will to be done, we begin another year in prayer. I hope you can come Wednesday night and join us for that.

I hope you'll be here this month, even if you're new, just to invite you into that as we lay down before the Lord and bow our hearts in a posture of prayerfulness and say, "Okay, God. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven in this area, in this area, in my life." This is what we want. This is what we're longing for.

This is what we need to be reminded of if we're going to persevere this commute another day. That's what we're going to ask. As we ask that, do you know what's beautiful? Scripture says even in heaven when we're asking and praying these types of prayers, we're joining the saints around the

throne. Those who have been martyred for their faith, this is what Revelation 6 says, and I'll end with this and pray.

This is John. **"I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'"** Do you hear what they're saying? "Come, Lord. How long do we have to wait?" Of course, Jesus' answer here, and then more generally as you keep reading the book of Revelation, is, "I'm coming soon," which is why the Spirit and the bride say, "Come."

Father, we thank you for the gift and the invitation you've given us in prayer and the promises you've made for us, that you hear us. Before we even pray, you hear our hearts. When we don't know what to pray, you intercede for us. Lord, would you lead us this next month to some really deep, rich places in the valley of prayer as we seek you, as we beseech you on behalf of our own congregation, but especially on behalf of the things in the world we believe break your heart, Lord?

We want to be found faithful when your Son returns and if he returns in this generation. If he doesn't, thought, we want to pass along this to the next generation. So, God, would you come and would you make us these types of people and make us this type of church? We love you. We're excited to depend on you in prayer and to learn how to do that. Thank you for your patience with us. In Christ's name, amen.