

“Earnest Prayer and Opened Prison Doors” // Acts 12:1–17 // SENT #16

Right before he preached here last weekend, Chris sent me a text that said,

“In my preparation to preach this weekend, I ran across this quote by Andrew Murray: *‘The man who mobilizes the Christian church to pray will make the greatest contribution to world evangelization in history.’* Something stirred in me as I read that. What if God would use me for that...at least in this church?”

I’m **grateful for leadership**—several men and women of God—who really hear from the Holy Spirit about what God wants in our church—when they speak, I listen.

I believe God wants to do something in this church regarding prayer—something greater than what he has done to this point.

YOU SEE... Every major season of awakening in Christianity—whether that’s in a church, on a college campus, or in a workplace... every single one has been characterized by intense, persistent corporate prayer. Every single one.

“The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from prayer. Our enemy fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion.

He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.

Prayer turns ordinary mortals into men of power. It brings fire. It brings rain. It brings life. It brings God. There is no power like that of prevailing prayer.” -Samuel Chadwick, *The Path of Prayer*

We’ve experienced a lot, Summit. But I believe **God has more** for us—(I’m not just saying that for hype.) I really believe it.

- More for our community. More for your families.
- ***And I believe the Lord has told me it will not come apart from prayer.***

Samuel Zwemer: “The history of missions is the history of answered prayer... I am convinced that when we stand before God...we will discover that every soul ever brought to a knowledge of Christ was in some way related to intercessory prayer.” (Dick Eastman)

So, let me ask you—a church is made up of a bunch of individuals: ***What’s your personal prayer life like? D. A. Carson says*** that if you really want to embarrass the average Christian, just ask them to tell you about his or her private prayer life. That’s the one thing most Christians are woefully deficient in.

- Carson cites a survey taken in a prominent evangelical seminary among **students training to be missionaries**... only 6 % could testify to regular quiet times, times of reading the Scriptures, of devoting themselves to prayer. 6%! And these are the elites!
- Carson said, *“It would be painful and embarrassing to uncover the prayer life of (even a lot of our) pastors, (much less our people).”*¹

Summit: **What if God had a lot more for us**—for our schools; our community; for our families—but we never got it because we simply didn’t really know how to *ask*?

Now, some of you, if you are honest, are kind of **SKEPTICAL** I on the whole subject of prayer... because **sometimes you see that you pray and things happen**; but sometimes you pray and they don’t;

¹ Carson, *Call for Spiritual Reformation*, 16–7

sometimes you don't pray and the thing you forgot to pray for happens anyway. (**Right? Don't look at me like that, like this is not an issue for you. I know that it is.**) Sometimes you are just not sure it actually works.

Well, I think the Holy Spirit has something really important for us in Acts 12—which gives you a snapshot into the prayer life of the church. *But don't turn there yet.*

I want to **start our teaching on this, however**, back in the Gospel of Luke. Because, you see, the books of **Luke and Acts go together**.

- They were originally **one volume**. And they fit together.
- You've got to think of Luke and Acts like a **hand and a glove**. In Luke, you see the shape of the divine hand in the person of Jesus. Then, in Acts, you see the invisible hand, the Holy Spirit, filling the church.
- So, **teaching presented by Jesus in Luke is experienced and applied** in Acts. The Gospel of Luke presents the doctrine; the book of Acts describes the application.

That's what you're going to see today: What Jesus teaches about prayer in Luke, you're going to see the church apply in Acts 12.

Luke 11:1–13

Luke 11, Jesus' disciples have asked him a question: **Luke 11:1, "Lord, teach us to pray."**

- They had noticed, in all his preaching and his miracles, that prayer seemed to be the source of his power. They didn't say, "Lord, teach us how to do those miracles" or "teach us how to write killer sermons." They said, "Lord, teach us to pray," because prayer was the key to the power behind the preaching and the miracles.

- (This whole teaching, by the way, is about prayer for the power of the Spirit: see down in vs. 13?) **"...how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13)**

Well, in response to their request, Jesus teaches them the Lord's prayer (which Chris covered last week), and then tells a rather odd, little story about a man who had unexpected visitors late one night. Because his visitors were hungry, the man went over to a neighbor's house to borrow some loaves of bread.

- **His friend was already in bed, asleep**, because that's what normal people do at midnight, especially since people went to bed when the sun went down (7pm) and so midnight is literally the middle of the night.
- Furthermore, **families slept together** in those days, so to oblige this request he would have to wake up everyone in the house.
- And on top of all *that*, the man asked for **three full loaves**, which was enough to feed a family for several days!
- In other words, this **brash neighbor had made a ridiculously excessive request at a most inopportune time**.

"Yet," Jesus says, **"because of his impudence [one translation says "shameless persistence"], he will rise and give him whatever he needs" (Luke 11:8).**

- **The neighbor hands over three cases of Pop-Tarts, not because the man is his friend** (after this event, he probably wasn't his friend!), but *because of his boldness and his persistence in asking*.
- **Won't your heavenly Father**, Jesus then says, who *never* sleeps, and who loves you like precious children, won't he give you whatever you need to do his will?
- **And if even an annoying neighbor can get an excessive request at an inopportune time through persistent asking**, don't you think you, who are like children to God, not an annoying neighbor can obtain what you need by persistence also?

Jesus goes on, **So I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who**

asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. (Luke 11:9–10)

- **These three verbs, “asks;” “seeks;” “knocks”** reinforce this teaching on persistence. They are all in a Greek verb form that implies *continuous action*.
- **It’s not enough, you see, to ask once.** You keep on asking.
 - **You can see that in the image of knocking.** When you knock on a door, you don’t knock once and then quit. (If my wife and I hear a single thump on our door at midnight, we assume that one of our kids has fallen out of the bunk bed, not that someone is knocking!)
- **That’s how prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit works,** Jesus says. We have to ask repeatedly; only then will God opens heaven’s door.

But you ask: “Well, why? If it is God’s will to give the power of the Spirit, then why not give his power the *first* time we ask?”

- Umm ... to be honest, I don’t know. But that’s clearly what Jesus teaches here, isn’t it? You got to keep asking.
- **Honestly, this teaching is so counter-intuitive** that I think Jesus had to teach it twice. Luke records Jesus teaching this same principle, in Luke 18, this time via a different (and even more extreme!) parable.

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ 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.’” (Luke 18:1–5)

Do you have anybody in your life like this?

Then Jesus says, quite unbelievably, “This is like praying to God.”

- Now, I’m **really glad Jesus told this parable**, not me. First, **comparing God** to a cranky, old, unjust judge? Who but Jesus could get away with such an analogy?
- And you **“wear God down”** through persistent, incessant, even annoying, asking? How is that not rude to God?
- **The point is not to *compare* God to an unjust judge, but to *contrast* him with one.** If even an unrighteous, selfish judge will grant answers because of persistent asking, Jesus reasons, won’t God, who cares about his children as a tender Father, give us what we need when we come to him, persistently, asking for the outpouring of his Spirit?
 - **God is not like an unjust judge**, and we are not like an annoying old widow to him.
 - **He’s not like a neighbor we are annoying.** He is a Father who cares so much about us that he spilled his own blood to rescue us.
 - **The widow approached this judge as a stranger...** But we come boldly into his presence like beloved children (Matt 11:13)
 - **She had no right to claim in court...** We come boldly to the throne of grace because of Jesus (Heb 10:19–22)
 - **God says to us:** You think I wouldn’t help you? What? Not help you! I bought you with my blood. I died for you. Since I have done the greater, will I not do the less? Your requests are nothing compared with what I am prepared to give. "

Look how Jesus ends the teaching (back in Luke 11)

Luke 11:11 What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; (ever do that—kid asks you for a chicken nugget and you’re like, “No, but here’s a cobra...”?) **12** or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? **13** If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

- **I've always thought it odd that Jesus used this moment to use the word "evil" about us.** Was this just a gratuitous insult—a reminder of our depravity?
- **No.** Most of us think of being at our best when we are with our kids. But even at our best parenting moment, compared to God's love for his kids, we are "evil." That's such a beautiful, hope-giving promise.
- **We're like precious kids** to God... My kids are the one group of people I'll get up in the middle of the night to help.
 - If you **call me in the middle of the night**... (what's that thing you love to get at Waffle House? I'm going to say, "How'd you get my number?") If you show up outside of my window to ask the same thing: you might ought to be wearing a bullet proof vest!
 - If **even my wife wakes me up** in the middle of the night with a non-urgent request, I won't typically help her: "Get me a drink of water." *Are your legs broken? Sick? Then get it yourself.*
 - But my kids: "Dad, I think there's a monster in the closet." "OK, let's go check."
- Jesus says: Ask like kids: bold, shameless, persistent.
- **A lot of us don't have prayers answered...reluctance**

Acts 12:1–17

So now, let's go to Acts 12:

V. 5: Peter is in prison. Awaiting execution by beheading the next day.

[5] So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

[6] 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. [7] 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." (little textual note: very strong Greek word for "struck." Smacked him. Pow!)

And the chains fell off his hands. [8] 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." [9] 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.

[10] 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 (like an automatic door at a grocery store), and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.

[11] 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."

[12] When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark (these are just regular people; not Apostles; one of the many small groups that met in houses around Jerusalem), where many were gathered together and were praying. "Were praying." Present tense. It's the middle of the night, and they were praying (i.e. are still praying)!

[13] And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. [14] Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in (she just left him there! Peter's like, "Look, I just escaped from prison—standing out here on the road twiddling my thumbs is not a *great* idea.") and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. [15] They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying "It is **his ghost!*" (His ghost! They think he's already been beheaded!

[16] But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. [17] But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

I want you to see three important things about their prayer:

1. Whatever they were afraid of, they talked to God about

- They were afraid for their future, so they talked to God about it.
- **Eugene Peterson**, in his book, *Answering God: How to Pray the Psalms*, points out two kinds of prayer in the Psalms I'd never recognized. "Evening prayer" and "morning prayer."
 - Evening prayer is marked by praying your worries to God. (Good e.g. Psalm 4). I read it this week. David commits to God the things he's **worrying about**. People that are **bothering him**. Things that are making him **angry or sad**. Reminding himself of the **promises of God**.
 - **Morning prayer** (Psalm 5) is active, petitionary prayer, where you pray boldly against things in the world that are not right. (I think you see both here in Acts 12).
- **This is, in a sense, evening prayer, where they commit what worries them to God.**
- **Question: What do you do when you are afraid?**
 - **If you would develop this practice of evening prayer**, it would give you such an incredible sense of peace.
 - Here's how David ends Psalm 4: "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety." (Psalm 4:8 ESV)
- I can sleep!
 - I'm talking to the one whose **arm controls the universe**;
 - who said that **no good thing would he withhold** from those who trust him!
 - Who takes **care of me like a Father** and knows when one hair falls from my head.

- Who **promises to direct all my steps** and lead me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake!
- **Can I encourage you to start the actual practice of evening prayer!** (Me at night: bad time for worry. Things get blown out of proportion... to staff: if I call you and fire you, ignore it. Now, I say: "I talked to God about that... I'll let him worry about it while I sleep and he'll tell me what to do with that tomorrow)
 - **4 HOUR Work Week: VA in India...** give assignment; go to bed; done! **ask them to worry!**

2. They used prayer like a war-time walkie-talkie, not a domestic intercom

- **What do we find the church praying about in Acts?** **Chris** talked about this last week: the mission.
- **Piper:** "Prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief. It is not surprising that prayer malfunctions when we try to make it a domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts in the den...Until you know that life is war, you cannot know what prayer is for: Prayer is for the accomplishment of a wartime mission." John Piper, *Desiring God*
- This is morning prayer. Morning prayer is this active, petitionary prayer.
 - It is marked by boldly praying for things in the world that are not right.
 - **"Rebellion against the status quo."**
- **They knew it was God's will for the church to get the gospel to the ends of the earth regardless of what Herod wanted.**
 - **They weren't sure how it was going to happen;** they weren't sure if Peter would make it or not (remember, they'd thought he died); but they knew that God's purpose was to get the gospel to the ends of the earth, so they got on their knees and said, "Lord, make it happen!"
- What do you know to be God's will? **Praying "with" God**

- **BTW: Every once in a while you hear people say something** that sounds so spiritual... “Prayer doesn’t change the situation; it changes me.” Not true!
 - **Prayer moves the arm** that moves the world!
 - **John Wesley:** I am convinced God does nothing except in answer to prayer!

Evening prayers, where you pour out your heart of worry to God the Father; **“morning prayers,”** where you boldly advance God’s kingdom. **What are your prayers like?**

- I’ve lamented before **how dumb the average Christian’s prayers** sound. We fill them up with clichés and platitudes, spending most of our time asking God for things he’s really already promised us:
 - **“God, be with us.”** God says, “Didn’t the gospel guarantee I’d never leave or forsake you. Ask me something else.”
 - Or, we spend the whole time asking God for things that really aren’t supposed to be the main focus:
 - **“Help me with my test.”** Fine, nothing wrong with that. But God says, “Why don’t you use the brain I gave to study and quit depending on me to transmogrify information into your lazy mind?”
 - **“Bless this food.”** He’s like: “You’re eating a ½ lb hamburger topped with 3 strips of bacon and onion straws. I can’t bless that. Go get some broccoli—they got a pre-built-in blessing you don’t even have to ask for.”
 - **“Give us traveling mercies.”** What the heck are those? Traveling mercies. I think God is probably like, *“Put on your seatbelt and drive the speed limit and stop texting when you drive. There’s your traveling mercy.”*
 - PRAY SCRIPTURE; CLAIM THE PROMISES OF GOD!
 - (Not saying there’s never a place to ask for these things... but you get my point, don’t you?)
 - **We are to spend most of our time praying for the advance** of God’s kingdom in the lives of our family; community; around the world.

- **Piper: “Until you know that life is war, you’ll never know what prayer is for!”**

3. They were persistent, like the widow.

Don’t you see how they illustrate what we learned in Luke?

- **They knew it was God’s will** for the church to get the gospel to the ends of the earth. And right now, **they have a real problem.** One of their main leaders has been taken out; the other is about to be killed.
- **They’re not sure if Peter was going to make it or not**—and they are at peace if he dies. **But they know it is not God’s will for Satan to destroy the church**, or to impede the church’s progress, so they get on their knees and say, “God, you’ve got to make something happen! And we’re not going to let you go until you open doors and bless our efforts and overcome our enemies.” *And they kept at it and wouldn’t give up!*
- DO YOU KNOW IT’S NOT GOD’S WILL FOR SATAN TO DESTROY YOUR FAMILY? *Is he?*
- **I know there are times when God directs us away from specific requests.**
 - Paul, **2 Cor 12:9**
 - Allie and Kharis’ **stuffed animal**
- But, in general, I think we give up **way too early.**
 - **Learn from this! Spurgeon: some fruit you have to keep shaking to get down!**
 - Sometimes you have to keep asking—**keep calling to God as if he’s asleep** (I have a couple of things in which I literally **visualize myself doing this**—“God, God, I know you are there; I know you care; I need this!”)
 - (Note that this is specifically about the power of the Holy Spirit...)

They prayed, like the needy neighbor, like the wearisome widow, for God, the good Father to give... And did he ever! The story ends with several twists of irony:

- Peter (who is Herod's prize prisoner), walks out **right underneath Herod's nose...** and on the **night before Herod kills him** to please the Jews! (Herod embarrassed)
- And then, there's this little story tucked in at the end of the chapter (vs. 20–22) (I won't take time to read it), but shortly after this Herod gives a speech...

[22] And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" (they were trying to flatter him because they want something from him) [23] Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

And they all lived happily every after. Not what it says... but it does say this... [24] But the word of God increased and multiplied.

The moral: don't mess with the church on its knees!

Every time the church really prays in Acts, things explode!

- **Acts 1:** They pray in the Upper Room for 10 straight days; the Holy Spirit comes, Peter preaches, and 3000 are saved. (0's)
- **Acts 4: they pray, and God fills them with such boldness** that they turn the city of Jerusalem **upside down**. By the end of Acts 5, the church in Jerusalem is **over 10,000 people** big and some of the **harshest critics** (like the Jewish priests, and eventually Paul himself), are getting saved.
- Here in **Acts 12:** they pray, and God blows up a prison and strikes down Herod, their persecutor, with worms.
- In the **next chapter, 13:** they pray, and God raises up Paul to be a missionary, the greatest missionary the world has ever known.

All these things happen because of prayer.

"The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from prayer. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray..."

Prayer turns ordinary mortals into men of power...It brings fire. It brings rain. It brings life. It brings God. There is no power like that of prevailing prayer." -Samuel Chadwick, *The Path of Prayer*

Wesley: God does nothing except...

(Application)

Again, tell me about your prayer life! Challenge:

- **Do you do morning and evening prayer** (do you have the prayer and quiet time guide we gave out last week? Available at **NEXT STEPS tent**)
- Get involved in **prayer groups!** **NEXT STEPS: Rep from campus.**
- **Start a group!** Like this one, lay led! summitrdu.com/prayer: links to groups at your campus; guides.
- **Lastly: Prioritize prayer times in our church.**

Cymbala: Sunday morning attendance: how popular the pastor is; prayer meeting attendance: how popular Jesus is

"The prayer meeting is an institution which ought to be very precious to us, and to be cherished very much by us as a Church, for to it we owe everything. When our comparatively little chapel was all but empty, was it not a well-known fact that the prayer meeting was always full? And when the Church increased, and the place was scarce large enough, it was the prayer meeting that did it all. When we went to Exeter Hall, we were a praying people, indeed; and when we entered on the larger speculation...of the Surrey Music-hall, what cries and tears went up to heaven for our success! And so it has been ever since. It is in the spirit of prayer that our strength lies; and if we lose this, the locks will be shorn from Samson, and the Church of God will become weak as water..." -Spurgeon, "Prayer Meetings" in *The C.H. Spurgeon Collection* (as cited in *The Lost Art of Praying Together*)s

Spurgeon: On one occasion, a visiting American pastor asked Spurgeon the secret to his success... he took him down to a room: 300 people praying! "Engine room." *This needs to be us!*

I don't think I've led you well in this... We are going to be doing our best to create more opportunities to pray. But really, nothing really replaces you becoming a person of persistent prayer...

Bow

Conclusion: Easter prayer