

## Pray Like You Mean It!

Luke 10:1-3

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*“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. And he said to them, ‘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. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves’” (Luke 10:1–3).*

We are taking a one week pause in our series in the Gospel of John for the launch of one of the most important weeks of the year: Prayer Week. We started this morning at 7:15 a.m., and we’ll have prayer events throughout the week.

There are three reasons we dedicate this week to prayer:

1. Prayer is an essential part of our relationship with God. Prayer is the way we commune with God, and it is critical to the spiritual life of every follower of Jesus.
2. We need God’s help. Prayer is a vital part of seeking his empowerment, his intervention, his provision, and his grace.
3. We need the reminder that we need God’s help. Daniel Henderson, who taught me how to lead corporate prayer, says, “Prayerlessness is my declaration of independency from God.” This may be the most relevant for our context because large churches tend to neglect prayer.

I praise God that this has not been the case for us. When I candidated at College Park in 2008, I requested to not only preach on a Sunday but to also lead a corporate prayer meeting. I did this because I wanted the church to realize that a vote for me as the next pastor was a vote for a philosophy rooted in Acts 6:4—“devoting ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

For the last ten years, along with our monthly Sunday evening prayer meeting, we’ve dedicated a week to fanning into the flame the embers of our prayer lives. We use this week to remind us what we know to be true: prayer is important. And we use it to encourage one another to pray more by praying together.

Let me give you a highlight of the prayer events for this week:

- Tonight is our Worship-Based Prayer Night at 5 p.m. All of our congregations will be together. We’ll rejoice at what God is doing in all of our church plants, and we’ll pray for one another. We are also hosting the chiefs of the police and fire departments. And we’ll intercede for them.

- On Monday, we are hosting a men's prayer event at 6:30 a.m. Brad Merchant will provide some teaching on prayer, and then we'll pray together as men. At 1 p.m., I'm teaching a gathering of women on how the prayer language of lament leads us to hope and trust.
- On Tuesday we have a Prayer Summit from 9-12. I'll lead an interactive three-hour prayer gathering where we'll sing, read scripture, and pray. We will be praying through the book of Titus.
- Wednesday, from 7-8, we'll host a prayer meeting in the Sanctuary led by our students.
- Thursday, there is a prayer meeting at noon inside the Indiana War Memorial
- Friday, we are hosting our regular First Friday Prayer for missions at the Ministry Center

You can find all the details about each of these events at [yourchurch.com/prayer-week](http://yourchurch.com/prayer-week).

Prayer Week takes commitment and conviction. There will be a hundred reasons why you can't make time to pray this week. But let me encourage you that we have seen God move mightily in the lives of our people because of this week. We've witnessed God intervening as we've prayed. I've seen it personally.

A few years ago, we had to cancel our Prayer Summit due to weather. One of our staff members asked me when we were going to reschedule. I wasn't sure. And he exhorted me to be sure that we rescheduled it. He reminded me of how God answered his prayer for an adoption and two others as they prayed for either an adopted child or being able to conceive. His exhortation and passion reminded me of all the ways we've seen God move.

So, I'm looking forward to this week with great expectancy. All of us have needs. All of us need to grow in prayer.

### **Pray Like You Mean It**

Our theme for prayer week has been stirring in my heart for some time. The Lord led me to multiple texts over the last three months, and I'd like to share with you a burden and a challenge that it seems the Lord has put on my heart.

Today, I'm going to walk you through Luke 10:1-3 and a few other texts. And then I'm going to issue you a challenge: from today until Easter (12 weeks), I'm challenging each of us to choose one to two things and then pray about them like we mean it.

I want you to find one thing—something important, something challenging, something for which you are desperate—and then pray like you mean it.

#### **1. Calling**

This text in Luke's gospel records the commissioning of seventy-two additional disciples for a very specific mission. If you study this gospel, you would discover that Jesus called his first disciples in chapter five. After Luke identifies the early miracles and the teaching of Jesus, chapter nine tells us that

Jesus sent out the twelve disciples. Jesus gave them spiritual authority and sent them out “to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:2). Our text builds upon this smaller mission.

The first verse in chapter ten says “after this.” These words connect the previous passage (9:57-62) where Jesus emphasizes the urgency and priority of following him as a disciple. Verse 62 is particularly important: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” In other words, being a follower of Jesus requires a perspective on Jesus that eclipses everything else.

The first verse of Luke 10 identifies a unique mission for a group of disciples. We learn that Jesus appointed 72 other disciples. Jesus already chose the twelve, and he sent them on various missions. This was a major expansion.

You might wonder why seventy-two. This number was historically associated with the nations of the world in light of the list of nations in Genesis 10. So, the number may have been symbolic of the comprehensive nature of Jesus’s ministry.

Jesus apparently has a plan or a strategy in mind. He appoints these seventy-two to travel in groups of two. This is probably connected to the concept of two witnesses establishing the truth of a situation since judgment will be pronounced on the unrepentant cities in verses 13-16.

Take note of the second half of verse one: “...sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go.” If you read verses 5-12, you would discover that they are to enter these cities, proclaim the message about the kingdom, and determine the response of the people.

There is a calling and a strategy here. This is important to note because sometimes people equate planning or developing a plan as if it is an ungodly step. For some people, true spirituality is when you “wing it” or are spontaneous. While I know you can plan God out of the equation, and I know that we can allow our strategies to become what we trust in, I find this text to be a helpful reminder that it is not an either-or choice.

Jesus will call for his disciples to pray earnestly as they execute his strategy. Planning and prayer don’t have to be mutually exclusive. But one thing must be clear: what is your calling?

The followers of Jesus have a divine calling on their lives. This is just one of many texts that tell us about the nature of being a disciple of Jesus or what God desires for us. A few other examples:

*“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age’” (Mt. 28:18–20).*

*“They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:16–18).*

But the mission and calling are not only to do something, but also to be something.

*“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy” (Col. 1:9–11).*

So, even though this text is not the specific calling that Jesus gave to you or me, there are important lessons for us to consider in a broader context. As a Christian, if you don’t realize what your calling in life is or if you live as if you’ve forgotten it, your prayer life will be significantly affected.

Prayer Week is a good time to ask ourselves about our specific calling. You might consider asking yourself these questions: What is your unique mission? What gifts does God want to use? What brings you great joy and delight? Where has he placed you in the world, in your career, in your neighborhood? What are you striving for? What’s important to you?

Your calling affects how you pray.

## **2. Difficulties**

The second reality in this text is connected to the challenges that we face. A disciple of Jesus has a calling over his or her life. However, the world is still broken. Resistance and difficulties are guaranteed. In John 16:33, Jesus told his disciples that they would face trouble. He didn’t pull any punches. The mission of God is set in the context of a world that is not right, where an enemy is on the attack. We see this in two places in our passage today.

We first see it with the phrase in verse two, “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” Jesus identifies to the seventy-two that they will see with their own eyes the potential harvest that exists. But they will also have to deal with the challenge of knowing that the odds are stacked against them when it comes to what they need. There will be a clear “gap” between what could happen if more people were involved. They will always be the minority. And as others would later discover, they will constantly face opposition. It simply comes with the territory or the calling.

When I was a young pastor, I remember an older man in ministry telling me, “Mark, get used to unlimited opportunity and limited resources.” Or, as I said to a fellow pastor this week, “Yeah, I’d like the problems that come with this decision more than the problems of that decision.” The reality is there are very few situations for the follower of Jesus that come without difficult limitations or challenging problems.

Rather than being surprised, frustrated, angry, and cynical, we can realize that this is part of what it means to be a disciple. You can be angry that people don’t care as deeply as you do. You can worry about the problems your kids are going to face. You can bemoan the fact that people aren’t as committed as you are. Or you can realize that this is part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and then let it drive you to pray.

Or you can become bitter and resentful. And when the enemy gets that into your heart, you rarely pray effectively (1 Tim. 2:8).

The second place we see the challenges is in verse three. Jesus tells the seventy that he is sending them as lambs in the midst of wolves. Now you don't have to own sheep to know that when lambs and wolves interact, the outcome is pretty predictable.

Jesus warns the disciples that their mission will face inconceivable odds. It will not normally be successful, and they should expect opposition. In fact, they should be surprised if they are well-received.

I don't think Jesus is trying to make the seventy depressed. Rather, he's simply acknowledging that his mission will be difficult. There will be opposition, distractions, and never enough resources. And the question is: what will that cause us to do? Will we worry? Will we become angry?

Or will we see the "gaps" in life as expected opportunities to pray? That leads us to the last point and the main thought for this sermon.

### 3. Prayer

Jesus's command to these disciples in light of what they will face is to "pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (v. 2). In light of the gaps that they were going to face in their mission and the great need that they would see, they should pray like they mean it.

What does it mean to pray earnestly? Let me give you four suggestions with the hope that you will put this into practice:

**Pray with desperation:** The Greek word is used in other places in the New Testament to mean to beg or plead when there is no other hope. It is used in Luke 5:12 for how a leper begged Jesus for healing. And it is used in 9:38 by a father who pleaded with Jesus to heal his son. So, this kind of praying appeals to God, knowing that he is our only hope.

**Pray with consistency:** In Luke 21:34-36, Jesus told his disciples that they shouldn't let their hearts be weighed down with the cares of this life or the various ways to dull the pain. Rather, they should stay awake at all times.

**Pray with confidence:** In Acts 4:31, we find the disciples praying for boldness in the midst of persecution. They were trusting God to give them what they needed. They asked for the kind of boldness that God promised he would give them.

Now, I'm going to give you one more. But before I do, can I just ask you to consider when was the last time you prayed like that? I would guess that for many of us, we prayed that like after we tried everything else. When all of our options ran out, when we had no more ideas, when our resources didn't line up, and when we were exhausted—that was the time we decided to really pray.

But here's the thing: didn't we need God's help as much at the beginning as we did at the end? I'm thankful the Lord uses those circumstances to lead us to pray eventually, but what would happen if we determined that our first step was to pray earnestly?

There's nothing wrong with strategy. Nothing sinful about planning. Using God-given wisdom is always the right thing to do. But *not* if it is in the place and at the neglect of prayer.

One of the challenges of the time in which we live and the culture around us is that there are things which serve to draw our hearts away from earnestly praying. Self-reliance and intellect can make us factor God right out of the equation. Our resources give us more options to solve our own problems than any other generation. Or our belief that the Christian life should not be hard can cause us to panic when hardship comes. Rather than crying out to God to ask him to move, we end up complaining because we are so disappointed.

That's why I want to invite you to consider one to two things for which you need to pray earnestly. What "gap" do you feel in your life right now for which you need God's help? What situation or circumstance, if answered, would give God glory for his intervention in your life? What answer to prayer would give you renewed confidence that God is real?

George Müller was such a man. He lived in the 1800s, and he was a man of deep, faith-filled prayer. Müller is most well-known for his care for orphans. Mueller never publicized the needs of the orphanage. He merely prayed about it.

Don Whitney writes about Müller's prayer life in his book, *Praying the Bible*:

*Through his orphanage in Bristol, Mueller cared for as many as two thousand orphans at a time—more than ten thousand in his lifetime. Yet he never made the needs of his ministries known to anyone except to God in prayer. Only through his annual reports did people learn after the fact what the needs had been during the previous year and how God had provided.*

*Mueller had over fifty thousand specific recorded answers to prayers in his journals, thirty thousand of which he said were answered the same day or the same hour that he prayed them. Think of it: that's five hundred definite answers to prayer each year—more than one per day—every single day for sixty years!<sup>1</sup>*

Now, we may not have as much God-given faith as Müller. But think of what would happen if we started encouraging one another for the next three months over the ways that God answered prayer. One of my goals from this sermon is for us to record not only what we are praying for, but also to celebrate when God answers.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.crossway.org/articles/what-george-mueller-can-teach-us-about-prayer/>

**Pray with hope:** the last suggestion regarding praying earnestly comes from John 16. After Jesus tells the twelve disciples that he is leaving them and that they will have difficulties, he encourages them to pray.

*“...Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”* (John 16:23–24).

A few months ago, I was meditating on this verse and it struck me that Jesus connected joy to the motivation to pray. Jesus anticipated the fullness of joy that would come as God answered their prayers, so he exhorts them to ask.

During a devotional, I encouraged our staff to consider what answer to prayer would bring them such joy that they should start praying for. I wanted them to consider what God might do if they took the step of faith to pray with joy in mind. It was stunning to see what God did in the life of our Assistant Pastor of Student Ministries, Zach Cochran.

So, church, as we start this week of prayer, I’m inviting you to embrace the calling of the gospel over your life, to embrace the reality of the difficulties that we face, and to pray like you mean it.

Pray desperately, faithfully, confidently, and expectantly.

Let’s take God at his word and pray like we mean it.

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