

Pastor Kyle Mercer  
Problems of Progress

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Series: One

Acts 11 & 12

**BIG IDEA – PROBLEMS SHOULD LEAD US TO DEEPER  
PARTNERSHIPS & DESPERATE PRAYER**

*Who is your one?* That's the question we're asking in this series. And it's more than a series; it's an initiative. We're asking this question, if you're new... *Who's that one person who's far from God and close to you?* Who's that one guy or gal that you're taking personal responsibility for the Great Commission? Then we're just asking you to do one simple thing, and it's easy. Would you take one risk in that one relationship?

In fact, last week, we gave you cards. (Actually, we gave you cards the last two weeks.) Last week, you came forward. I have some pictures. We had hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of you who put the cards in the basket, saying, "Lord, I'm going to put this person before you. I'm going to do my best, and I'm going to trust you with the rest." We're excited for how God is going to use this series.

It actually reminds me... I was listening to this podcast. You know, everyone is listening to podcasts nowadays. So, I'm listening to this podcast. It wasn't even about what we're talking about, but they had this mathematician on. I mean, this guy has a PhD in math, so he's really smart. He's talking about this concept, and he goes, "Do you know what the biggest difference in math is? It's not the difference between one and a million." I'm like, "Well, that sounds like a big difference."

"It's not the difference between one and a billion or one and a trillion." He said, "The biggest difference in math, technically speaking, is going from zero to one, because at zero you have nothing, and at one, at least you have something." So, here's what we're doing in this series. Everybody in our church is going from zero to one...one person that they're going to take personal responsibility for the Great Commission.

Here's the other interesting thing. When you got in here, we put *this* on your seat. You're like, "Are you going to give us something every week?" Maybe not every week. Last week we gave you the wristband, the week before the card. Guys, here's what we want you to do. We want you to pray for your one. We know why people don't pray, because people tell us why they don't pray, and I know why I don't pray.

The reason we don't pray is we don't know where to start, and we don't know what to say. That makes it hard. It's like, "Where do I start, and what do I say?" Some of you are tired, and I get it. You're tired about praying for the same people in the same ways using the same words.

So, what we want to give you... There are 10 different things on there from Scripture. There are Scripture verses so you can pray God's heart. There are plumb lines, or sentences, you can pray based on Scripture for your one. So, guys, let's start today by praying together, and then we're going to dive into Acts, chapter 11. Let's pray.

Lord, we are going to be, by grace, a praying church. We are going to pray. Parents are going to pray. Couples are going to pray. Families are going to pray. Individuals are going to pray. We are going to seek you in prayer. We're going to talk about this today, Lord, but we believe that when man works, man works, but when man prays, you work.

We believe prayer makes a difference and that you have uniquely decided, in your wisdom and sovereignty, to use prayer as a means to accomplishing your will on earth. So, would you make us a praying people? Would you use your Word in this passage today to encourage us? We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

All right. Don't answer this out loud, but what does it take to discourage you? We're all different, but what does it take...? For some of you, it's not much. What does it take for you to give up and give in? What does it take for you to stop or for you to quit? Maybe you're trying to share the gospel, and one person isn't interested, and you're like, "That's it. I'm done."

What we want to build here is a church that has staying power. That's maybe a modern way to say it. Here's what Jesus called it: endurance and perseverance. Here's what I want you to know: if you're going to try to be a faithful Christian, you're going to experience hardship, setbacks, and roadblocks, and sometimes it's going to feel like you're running into a stiff headwind as you're trying to follow Christ in this culture.

What we're going to see today is that the early church... If you'll type to or turn to Acts 11, we're going to start in verse 19. We're going to meet this really young church. It's really young. It's younger than us. We're 7 years old. We turned 7 last

week, I think it was. So, we're 7 years old. This church is like a year or two old. We don't know for sure. We don't even know who started it. We'll get there.

The church is really, really young, and they're having a lot of problems. They're also having a lot of grace on their lives, and they're also suffering a lot. So, here are the things they're going to face. You're going to try to follow this. Today, they're going to face financial hardship. That'll wear on you. Have you ever had that happen to you?

They're going to face persecution. They're going to face political opposition. They're going to face the loss of a key leader in their church, and the other leader is going to be in prison. So, they're going to have a lot of setbacks. Here's what they're going to learn, and I hope *we'll* learn this. The obstacles in our lives (I really believe this) are opportunities for God to show up and show off.

Listen. You're going to have problems. You might ask this question: "What is the problem with my life?" The problem with your life is that the set of problems in your life is never going away. You used to have poor people problems; now you have rich people problems. You used to have single people problems; now you have married people problems. Your problems are never going away.

Here's the lesson for today, because some of you may have to leave early, and we're going to cover a lot of Scripture here. Here's what we're going to do. The main message (and I'll show you this; it arises right out of Scripture) is that our problems, which are never going away (and if we're faithful to Christ, probably only increasing in our lives), should lead us to deeper partnership with other Christians and desperate prayer toward God. It's that simple. It arises right out of the text.

You have a problem. How should you respond? You should go to other Christians to help in partnership, and you should go to God in prayer. So, let me show you this. I'll show you what's happening. We have to get the context. Go with me to verse 19 of chapter 11. "***Now those who were scattered...***" So, the Christians go and start sharing the gospel everywhere. Why? "***...because of the persecution...***" Okay. So, here's a hardship. "***...that arose over Stephen...***"

Remember in Acts 7, Stephen preaches a sermon, and he dies faithfully? He's the first martyr, but he gets all of the other Christians connected to him in trouble. What they notice is after Acts, chapter 7, the persecution goes from being the leaders and the apostles to being everyone. So, here's what happens. "***...traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.***"

How does the church get spread into other places? It gets scattered through persecution. Here are a couple of things on persecution. First of all, if you're persecuted... I don't know what the future holds, and I'm not a doomsday guy, but we need to talk about this now so we're ready in the future.

If persecution comes, it's okay to leave if you're being persecuted. Do you see that? They left. Here's what the apostle Paul did. This is what we can tell from Acts and his letters. If Paul is being persecuted, and it's just him, and he's the only one affected, then he stays, but if he's connected to other people whom he can get in trouble, then he leaves.

So, how do I know you can leave if you're being persecuted? Because Jesus says, "If they persecute you in one town..." I'm literally quoting Scripture here. "...flee to the next town." So, they decide, "I don't have to put up with this. I'm leaving." So they do. The good thing is they end up taking the gospel with them. If you look at the verse (I just read it), they start speaking the Word all over the place.

By the way, we never know what God is doing. You look at it from one level, and you're like, "Oh, look at this poor church. They're being persecuted. Look. They have to leave. They have to move. He has to get a new job." All that's true, and God is using it to move his Word.

Verse 20: ***"But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch..."*** Wait until next week. I'll show you this more. The gravitational center is moving from Jerusalem to Antioch. The church at Antioch becomes the most important church for the rest of the book of Acts. ***"...spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus."***

Here's what happens. This is very simple, but I have to set this whole thing up. Throughout the book of Acts (and this is how it should work today as well), the gospel moves geographically, and then culturally. So, it moves geographically (new places), and then it moves culturally (it reaches new types of people). It was basically Jerusalem, and it was reaching mostly Jews, Samaritans, and a few Gentiles.

Now it goes to Antioch, and it's reaching Greeks and Hellenists. We'll see all this as time goes on. There's a shift, and they're at Antioch. By the way, we have no idea, to this day, even with all of our technology and archaeology, and all that, who started the church in Antioch...what man, what woman, what group. Unnamed. It becomes the most influential and the first international church in the Bible. We don't know who started it. I think that's by design. Who knows the people God will use?

Here's what it says next: ***"And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord."*** So, they're suffering, but God's hand is on

them. How many times do you look at somebody and go, "Well, they're suffering, so God must have forsaken them"? Or how many times do we tend to look at our lives and say, "If I'm suffering, God must not be with me"?

See, here's the thing. When you're suffering, you have a unique opportunity to share the gospel with other people. Why? Because nobody cares that you're following Christ when your life is well. It's like, "Well, great. Thank God you have the nice house, you have the nice car, you have the good marriage, and you have the healthy kids." But when suffering comes into your life, and you say, "I still believe God. I'm still trusting God. I'm still following Jesus," that's strange, and that's attractive to the world.

So, they have this huge impact while they're suffering, but here's what happens. Here's what we have to understand. This church is a little church. It's growing quickly, but it's little. It doesn't have a lot of leadership, we don't even know who started it, and they're being persecuted, so they need help. Thankfully, they're going to get it.

Verse 22: ***"The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem..."*** They didn't have texting, and all that kind of stuff, but they were able to communicate with one another. The smaller church, Antioch, lets them know, "Hey, there's something going on up here." It gets to Jerusalem. Look at this. ***"...and they sent Barnabas to Antioch."***

Have you ever heard of Barnabas before? I'm going to talk to you about Barnabas. I may affectionately, for the rest of the sermon, call him *Barney* because it's a little easier. So, Barney. What is Barney doing? First of all, his name hasn't always been Barnabas. I don't expect you to know this. If you go to Acts, chapter 4, guess what his name is? Joseph.

His name is Joseph, but he gets nicknamed Barney. Why did they nickname him Barney? What does *Barnabas* mean in the literal Greek? It means son of encouragement. The first time we see Barnabas, what is he doing? It's at the end of Acts, chapter 4. The church needs funds to expand to new places.

This is really encouraging. Barnabas is a wealthy guy who says, "I have this extra field." He sells it, and he's an early adopter and generous giver to a new vision. Man! The church needs that. "Hey, we're going to start this campus. Hey, we're going to plant this church. Hey, we're going to partner with this nonprofit." We always need early adopters who say, "I believe in you, and I see this when no one else does."

He's so encouraged that they end up calling him *son of encouragement*. By the way, you never know how much your generosity can encourage those around you. We all

know this. Do you want to raise stingy kids or generous kids? Generous. Do you want to marry a stingy person or a generous person? A generous person. Do you want to be friends and neighbors with a generous person or a stingy person? Do you want to work for a generous person or a stingy person? You know the answer: generous.

So, generous people naturally encourage us. The second thing about him is in Acts 9. In Acts 9 (this is important because it's going to come back to this), he meets Paul. Now, Paul had big trouble making Christian friends. Could you see why? It's like, "I used to kill you guys, but I'm cool now. I promise." It didn't work too well for him.

So, Barney comes to him, pulls him aside, brings him in front of everybody, and says, "Hey, listen, guys. I know he has a terrible past." This is what Barnabases do, and we need this in our church. They don't typecast people from the past. We're in a small city. I know how some of you are. "Well, at the other church, they always..." "In our homeschool co-op, she..." "At our private Christian school, they..." Stop that.

You need a Barnabas. Barnabas says, "Hey, listen. I actually believe in the grace of God. I actually believe people change, and I want to tell you that this person changed." He has the relational weight and trust to go, "Hey, listen. I trust him. You trust me. Now you trust him." Barnabas is responsible for bringing Paul into Christian community long-term.

The third thing we're told here... Verse 22: ***"The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch."*** Barnabas was the kind of person a church could send to other churches. That would be one good goal for your life. Think about this. If we had to send somebody from our church... I don't know.

We're planting something in Boone, and we're like, "We need to see how it's going. Who could we send?" What kind of person do you send? Somebody you trust. Actually, more importantly, somebody who embodies the vision and values of the church; somebody who is spiritually mature enough to know if it's a good work.

They're basically sending off and being like, "Is this prosperity gospel? I mean, are people coming to Christ? Is this easy believism? What's going on up there?" They don't know, so they send a leader. So, Barnabas comes up. Guys, this is what we want. This is what we need. Look at verse 23. Could you be a Barnabas? You should leave today going, "I should be like Barnabas in my family. I should be like Barnabas in my workplace."

I want you to see what it says. ***"When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad..."*** Can you see the grace of God in other people's lives? Guys, it didn't look like

the grace of God. Does persecuting look like the grace of God? I mean, they weren't very organized. They had no clear leadership structure. They didn't know much Bible.

Here's what a Barnabas does, and this is what we need from you, especially those of you who are older, and that's relative. Older people are Barnabases for younger people. They come into their lives. They look at someone's marriage, and they go, "I know it looks terrible, doesn't it? It does look terrible, and I know how hard that can be, but I want to tell you something. I see the grace of God."

What is the grace of God? "I see God working in your life." The grace of God is always "I see what God is doing," and here's the other part of the grace of God: "And I see what God could do." "I see how your marriage could be different in ten years (or five years or three years)." The other thing he does that we're not very good at is he sees the grace of God, and he's glad.

Some of you see the grace of God and are mad. "Why do they have so much money? Why are their kids well behaved? Why is their marriage flourishing?" This is the worst in churches. We look at some other church God is using, and we're like, "Why? Why not us?" See, this is the difference between a servant and a critic.

A *critic* only sees the negative things and comes in and says, "Can I take some time and tell you all of the problems with your marriage? Can I tell you all of the problems with your family? Can I tell you all of the problems with your church? Can I tell you all of the problems with your Community Group?" It's like, "Oh, gosh." A *servant* comes in and says, "I see those problems, but I also see the grace of God."

But he's not a pushover. Look at the same verse. Some people are just nice. They're not that helpful because they tell you one side of the story. They're like, "Everything is going to be fine." That's not helpful. Look at what he does. Verse 23: "**...and he exhorted them...**" Yes! By the way, it's hard to get this right. Every parent knows this. Every boss knows this. Every leader knows this. Getting encouragement and exhortation balanced and living in that tension is very hard.

So, he encourages them, but he exhorts them. "**...and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose...**" This is going to be important. He says, "Guys, get in here." I don't know how big the church was, but it wasn't that big. He says, "Guys, I need to tell you something. I see what God is doing here. I actually see this could be a very influential church. I need you guys to be faithful. Why do you need to be faithful? Because there's a lot of temptation and trial ahead."

This is going to be an important word. Why is this an important word? Because James is about to die. Barnabas gets them ready to deal with the death of James. And how

does he do it? He needs to go recruit Paul. Look at what he does here. Verse 25: ***"So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul..."***

Barnabas is humble enough (some of you need to get here) to know he needs help. Barnabas is like, "I am not this great Bible teacher, and what this church needs is what every church needs. It needs doctrine. It needs theology. It needs biblical teaching. It needs a Christian worldview." By the way, that's all we're doing here every week. We're giving ourselves a Christian worldview to live out of.

He says, "Guys, I'm not the guy. I've got to go get Saul." So he goes and recruits. This is what you have to do when you're building the church. You have to find the right people. You recruit them and put them in the right position, and you go, "You're the right person for this." So, that's what he does. He calls this guy.

Look here. Verse 26: ***"...and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people."*** So, they needed a year of Bible teaching. Here's what I want us to see here: Barnabas and Saul have a friendship, but they have more than a friendship.

See, Barnabas and Saul have something like Paul has with Timothy or Paul has with Silas or Paul has with Titus, and there are other relationships. Here's what this is. They have gospel partnership, not just Christian friendship. Please do not settle for Christian friendship merely.

Here's what happens. I know how it works. I did college ministry for 10 years, and I was a college student for four years, so I was on a college campus for 14 years. I know what happens to Christians when they come onto a college campus if they're trying to be faithful. They're like, "Okay. I don't want to get drunk every weekend. Who can be my friends? There are a couple of four-letter words I don't want to say, and I don't really want to hear them a lot. Who could be my friends?"

What they end up finding is just a bunch of Christian friends, and the world looks at them and goes, "You guys are just a bunch of naïve nice people who don't know how to have fun. You're kind of prudes." Because all you are is Christian friends. A Christian friendship is known for all of the things they don't do.

Wait till you get a family. Right? Then you want to homeschool your kids or you want to do private school. I don't know. You want to do something. Then you get all worried because the college is going crazy. You're like, "Okay. Here's what our family needs. Our family needs Christian friendships. That's what we need. Sally has to sleep over at someone's house I feel okay with, so we need Christian friendships."



Great. You need more than Christian friendships, not less. We need gospel partnerships. Gospel partnerships say, "Let's pray with one another." Gospel partnership says, "The gospel and Jesus Christ are at the center of this relationship." Gospel partnership says, "We're going to grow spiritually together."

Gospel partnership says, "There's going to be accountability in this relationship." Gospel partnership says, "Maybe you brought us together so we could be better together than we were apart." Don't settle for Christian friendship; shoot for gospel partnership.

Look at what happens. This is the result of a gospel partnership and biblical teaching and leadership. ***"And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians."*** Why in Antioch? You have to understand this. Until this point, all of the Christians were Jews who were converted to Christianity in Jerusalem, for the most part.

So, here's what the average person looked at. "Oh, this is a crazy, religious, Jewish sect that follows Jesus." As soon as you get out to Antioch, it's like, "Well, no one here is Jewish, and they're all..." We'll see this in chapter 13. "...from different places in the world, but they all claim Jesus is Lord. What do we call them?"

What they did was they took a term the Herodians had. The Herodians were people who had pledged allegiance to Herod. So, they said, "Well, that kind of looks like what the Christians have done." So, they called the Christians, *Christians* first in Antioch, because they said, "You guys pledge allegiance to Jesus," which, by the way, is what it means to be a Christian.

This was a derogatory and demeaning term. This is, by the way, how a lot of terms start. When people say *Methodists*... That was a term they gave John Wesley and his followers, who started the Methodist Church, because they were really into methods. Finally, they just said, "Fine. We kind of *are* into methods. You want to call us *Methodists*? Cool."

Then the Baptists got the name because they baptized believers, and they were called the *Baptists*. They said, "Well, I guess that is kind of true. That's what we're about, so call us the *Baptists*." Here's the problem today: *Christian* is the most watered-down, shallow, surface-level title for a follower of Jesus today in America.

It's only used three times in the New Testament. Here, a little bit later in Acts, and in 1 Peter the word *Christian* is used. It's much more common to say *brothers and sisters in Christ*, *followers of Jesus*, or *disciples of Jesus*. Look. I think we can still redeem *Christian*, but let's just be honest. So many people say they're a Christian, and they're not. Everybody over 55 in Winston-Salem thinks they're a Christian, and most of them are not.

It might be helpful to say something like, "I'm a..." Could you imagine saying this? "I'm a disciple of Jesus." People would be like, "And what denomination is that?" It's like, "I follow Jesus. That's what I do. That's what I'm trying to do. Yes, you could also call me a *Christian*, but really, at the heart, what I'm trying to do is be a follower of Jesus."

Anyway, they're called *Christians* first at Antioch. Then I need you to see what happens next. They meet their second trial. Their first trial is they're disorganized, they're young, they're suffering, and they need leadership, and God sends leaders to teach them the Bible. Okay. Great. Love it.

The second one is this. Verse 27: "***Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.***" Again, Jerusalem is the mothership, so they send a prophet down. They didn't have the written-down Word of God, so they would raise up men, and these men would give people God's word, and they would test it.

This is the word of God. This is what I want you to hear. So, here's the word of God, but look at what happens here. "***And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).***"

Here's what I want you to hear. This prophet comes down and says, "Hey, guys. There's going to be this big famine. It's going to affect *this* part of the world, and here's the thing: there are churches there. There are probably at least two things that are going to happen. First, the Christians in these churches may not have enough money, so we need to meet their needs. The second is, guys..."

We say this here all the time: How do you pray for a city? Who knows how to pray for a city? You pray for a city by praying for the churches in that city, because the city will only be as strong as the churches in that city. So, he knows also, "Guys, if these churches... If their lamp goes out, that city is done. The mission needs to go farther, so we need to fund these churches."

So, look at what the disciples do. Verse 29: "***So the disciples determined...***" It was a decision. "***...every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.***" Okay. Here's what they did: they were soft and sensitive to what God's word said.

Here, we're trying to build a church where it's like, "Yes, be strong. Yes, be bold. Yes, be courageous," and all those kinds of things. "Endure. Persevere." But when it comes to God's Word, be very sensitive and very soft. When you read the Bible and it says, "Forgive," you need to go, "I need to forgive my dad. I don't know how I'm going to do

it, but I know what God said is right and good for me and will bring him in flourishing, so, if the Bible says it, I'm going to try to do it."

That's why you read another thing, and it says, "Repent of all your sexual immorality," and you're like, "Okay. All right. We live in this confused culture, and I have a lot of things I have to work on, but I'm going to work on them." Then you read about sharing your faith with other people, and you go, "Well, the Bible says it, and people are lost, and I want to respond."

The problem is we don't often do the same thing when it comes to generosity. It's interesting here, because generosity in this church... This church is a brand-new, infant, baby church, and they're generous. I don't know why. Some people think generosity is for the super-saints. It's like a ladder I climb, and at the very top, at the end of my Christian life, decades in, I finally am generous.

Generosity can be at the very beginning. See, guys, we don't have that many values in our church, because you can't. If you have 100 values, you have no values. So, we only have a few values. I'm not going to tell you every one of them, but I'll tell you four of the main ones: *gospel*, *community*, *mission*, and *generosity*. That makes sense.

*Gospel*. Jesus Christ, dead, buried, raised, sinless life, substitutionary death...all that. We're going to talk about that. *Community*. "Hey, you're needed and needy. Get in a group. Get on a team," and all that. *Mission*. "Hey, guys, ONE Initiative. We're going to plant churches, and we're going to reach people who are far from God." But don't forget the fourth one. The fourth one is *generosity*.

Here's what's interesting, and I want us to get this. This is so important. When it comes to generosity, God is so wise. What God did with generosity is he said this: "The very thing that will take the mission the farthest will take you the deepest in your walk with God." Think with me about this. That's what generosity does.

Generosity fuels and funds the mission of the church, and the church can only go as far and as fast as the generosity in that church. I want you to understand that. Then I also want you to understand that it's not just about going deeper or going wider. The very same thing that will take the message and ministry of Jesus the farthest will take you the deepest.

I've told some of you this before. When I first came here, I had a pastor say, "Kyle, you're going to have to talk about money." I already kind of knew that, but he said, "The reason you're going to have to talk about money is because it's the main thing people worship, and they don't even know it." He said, "You wouldn't ever go to a church and think, 'We can't talk about sex.'"

By the way, those are the two areas that it's like... You know you're really a Christian when you've given those two areas to the Lord. You do not know you're a Christian because you go to church...please...or you're in a Community Group or you're on some "serve one, attend one" or you do some devotional or you listen to *The Bible Recap*.

You know you're the real deal when you've given the Lord your sexuality and your finances. Some of you go, "I trust Jesus with my salvation." You don't trust Jesus with your salary. I don't believe you trust Jesus with your salvation if you don't trust him with your salary.

Here's the thing. I'm just going to show you this one text. Look. It says, "Everyone gave." Okay? I only talk about this as often as it comes up. If you're a new guest, welcome. Sorry. I won't talk about it next week...I don't think. We'll see. It comes up, guys. Here's the thing: everyone gave.

Giving is not optional. It's not for the super-saint. It's not you read the verses on giving, and you're looking for, "Is there an asterisk where I can flip to the back of my Bible and see a picture of me, saying, 'This person doesn't have to do it?'" No. It needs to be a priority.

Here's the interesting thing about me. I came to Christ at 16. I was working at McDonald's. I had a great youth pastor, so I was taught... I was making \$5.15 an hour working at McDonald's. I remember this. I was just taught, "You make a dollar, you give a dime. You make \$10, you give \$1. You make \$1,000, you give \$100." I was just taught this, and I was taught the priority of giving.

The second thing is it says everyone gave according to their ability. This is why we teach percentage giving here. Here's the dirty secret: the more money Christians make, the less money they give, percentage-wise. Do you know who are the worst? Millennials. I am a geriatric Millennial, but still, Millennials. Millennials are like, "You know what? I gave \$100." It's like, "You make \$75,000!"

Someone is like, "You know what? I gave \$200 to the GoFundMe page, and I almost did it anonymously...almost. But I decided to put my name last minute." Guys, that is not what God is talking about. Here's what God wants you to do. God wants you to give 10 percent of your income to the kingdom of God for the rest of your life. That's something very different than God-tipping. God wants you to give 10 percent of your income to the kingdom of God for the rest of your life.

Then part of what happens in generosity is you... Here's what "according to your ability" means. And there are a lot of you like this. You're the emerging affluent of Winston. Here's what that means: you will make more money in the future than you make now. Here's what you're going to have to do. You're going to have to make this

commitment to yourself: "I'm not just going to increase my standard of living; I'm also going to increase my standard of giving."

I know how you guys are, because we're all the same. You already know the car you want. It's not the car you have. You know the neighborhood or the type of house you want, and you already know the vacations you want to take and you one day will take. You know all of the things you're going to do for your kids. It's like, "Well, praise the Lord." Increase your standard of living, but also increase your standard of giving.

Look. There are two types of needy churches. You think of the first type of needy church. Like, "Oh, look at this church. They have no money" or "They had a crisis" or "They're just getting started." That is a very needy type of church. Then there's a second needy type of church, and it's a church like Two Cities. We're not needy in the sense... We're completely fine financially, 100 percent.

We're needy in the sense that we have more vision than provision right now. We have way more momentum than money. We have so many things we want to do, and the only thing that is... We don't have a problem with vision. We don't have a problem with people. We don't have a problem with mobilizing. We have one thing that's lacking: enough money to take us where we want to go.

Here's the problem. Many of you in the church are very, very generous, but some of you, and a larger portion than I'd care to mention, are not generous at all. I don't know what it says about your spiritual condition. I do not know what it says that you come here and consume and give nothing to the kingdom of God. If there were 10,000 of you, it would make 0 percent difference, because you haven't made that shift from zero to one.

So, they have a financial problem, and the answer is the generosity of the church. This is important, because something terrible is going to happen next. Chapter 12, verse 1: **"About that time Herod the king..."** Oh no. If you write down in your Bible, write "Bad guy." You're like, "Who's Herod? Is this the Herod who tried to kill Jesus when he was 2?" No. That was his grandfather. You're like, "Is this the Herod who cut off John the Baptist's head?" No. That was his dad. So, this is a bad family.

It says, **"About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church."** Here's the other thing: there's always going to be political opposition. Have you seen what's happening? I don't know if it all got passed, but you saw it happen in California. Right?

I don't fully understand everything, but they've now passed this law, or it's going to get passed, where parents who are separating and there are child custody issues... They're going to take into consideration whether or not the parent will affirm the

gender identity and personal pronouns of a confused teenager. Are you kidding me? There will always be political opposition to biblical truth.

By the way, I want you to know this and hopefully be confident in our church in this. We're thinking about these things. Part of what you realize is the enemies of God have a plan. So, we're not going to sit by and go, "I don't know what's going on. I'm going to be naïve and weak and innocent." No, we're not. We're always thinking of the downside. What would happen, and what would we do?

So, this church has a problem. Look at what happens. This is what Herod does. Verse 2: **"He killed James the brother of John with the sword..."** This is another thing we have to talk about. Sometimes horrible things happen in your church and you don't understand them. This is very personal for me. This is very personal for our church. If you're new, you don't know this. About seven weeks ago, we lost one of my best friends, one of our elders in the church. He died suddenly on a run.

I had all of the same thoughts about him that I bet the early church had about James. If you read "James," you go, "No, James doesn't die. If there's one of the twelve apostles who doesn't die, it's James." Right? If I were to put you on the spot and go, "Name all twelve apostles," you couldn't, because most of them we don't even remember, but we remember Peter, James, and John. Right?

Those three got to go to the Mount of Transfiguration. Those three got to come into the garden of Gethsemane and pray. They were in the inner circle. John and James were brothers. Think about how their mom must have experienced it, because here's what's interesting: James is the first apostle to die. John will be the last apostle to die.

James dies right after Jesus dies and is risen from the dead. James doesn't get to write any books of the Bible. That's a different James who writes... John gets to write 1, 2, and 3 John, gets to write John, and gets to write Revelation. So, part of what you do in these moments is you just lean into the mystery of providence. John Wesley basically said, "I'm invincible until God calls me home."

You don't try to answer all of the questions, because if you try to answer all of the questions, you'll just go to a darker place yourself, but what you can't do is become bitter when terrible things happen in your life. How do we know the church doesn't become bitter? Because in just a minute, we're going to see they pray for Peter to get out of prison. So, what's going to happen is something terrible.

Listen. You're going to suffer. Obviously. Here's how you suffer: you love a lot of people and you live a long time. That's all you have to do, and you're going to suffer, because either you're going to get sick or someone you love is going to get sick or you're going to die or someone you love is going to die. It's going to happen. So,

they're getting ready to experience this, and they don't become bitter because God didn't answer their prayer. Instead, they keep praying for Peter. I'll show you this.

***"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."***

Okay. Here's what happened. He wanted to kill Peter also, but he couldn't kill Peter because it was during the Passover, and the Jewish law said you couldn't do executions during the Passover. So, the only reason, humanly speaking, Peter isn't killed also is because of this. Again, it's not fair. Right? It's like, "Wait. James dies. Peter gets delivered?" He only goes to prison, but he only spends one night in prison, and then he gets out. How does that work?

Well, look at verse 5. This is the key verse. This is the transitional verse for the whole chapter. ***"So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church."*** What if that defined our church? What if [blank] happens but earnest prayer was made by Two Cities Church? "Joe lost his job, but earnest prayer was made to God by our church."

"Man, that couple has a rocky marriage. They've called a divorce attorney, and he has already moved out, but earnest prayer was made to God by the church." You know, "John went in, and he got the phone call he didn't want to get after his doctor's appointment. It's stage 3, and it's pancreatic cancer, and it's not looking good, but earnest prayer was made to God by the church." This is what we're trying to do here.

See, here's what they do. The first thing they do when they have a problem is they go to God in prayer. What is the first thing we tend to do when we have a problem? We create a plan. I'm not against plans. They're praying; they're not protesting. Am I against protesting? No. Guys, we're Protestant. What's the root word of *Protestant*? *Protest*. I'm not against protesting.

Here's what happens with us. Something terrible happens, and we think there is a technology or a technique that'll fix it. This is what young people think all the time. "Oh, by the time I get cancer, there will be a pill or some non-invasive outpatient surgery." This is why, by the way, some types of cancers just wreck people, because you realize, "There is no chemotherapy that's helping with this. There is no radiation that's helping for this. We just gave you a six-months diagnosis is what we gave you."

What happened is they turned to God in prayer instead of turning somewhere else. Now, why don't we pray more? Like, if God answered all of your prayers from this

last month, what would happen? Would we have revival, and would the baptismal tanks be full if God said, "That's it. I'm going to answer all of the prayers you prayed in the last month"? Or would the cute guy from work ask you out and Wake beats Clemson next week?

Let's just be honest. I know we're in church. It's no time to be honest, but let's be honest for a second. Why don't we pray? We don't pray because we don't believe it makes a difference. Let's be gentle with ourselves for a second. Why? Well, have you ever prayed for something, and then it happened, but then you had this thought in your brain? Half of you is like, "Oh, that's awesome. The Lord is faithful." The other half of you goes, "I think it would have happened if I didn't pray."

Or have you ever had *this* happen? Someone says, "Will you pray for me?" and you say you will, but you forget because you're busy, and whatever. They go, "Hey, you know, you were praying I'd get another job. I got another job." You're thinking, "I didn't even pray, and it happened. Maybe I don't need to pray. Maybe things happen when I don't pray."

Or the most discouraging: "I prayed, and nothing has happened." "I prayed, and we're still infertile. I prayed that Grandma would live, and she died. I prayed for healing, and I still have this chronic illness. I prayed for marriage, and I'm still single." It's very hard on us. What it says here is we should have earnest prayer.

Here's what we believe. We believe at least two things about prayer. We believe prayer makes a difference. Of course you're going to expect me to say that. Like, really. Prayer can make a difference in your marriage. Prayer can make a difference in your parenting. When we pray, God moves. But there's actually something deeper that Jesus says. Jesus doesn't just say prayer makes a difference; he says there are certain things that don't happen apart from prayer. That's a little bit scarier.

Remember? Jesus says that. The disciples can't cast out this demon. They get him. He casts out the demon. Afterward, they're like, "Jesus, how did that happen?" He goes, "Some things only come out by prayer." So, I think you need to wear some of this by the grace of God. You need to feel the heaviness of this.

There are certain things that will not happen in your marriage apart from prayer. There are certain things that don't happen in your kid's life apart from prayer. I'm not just saying, "Pray, because it will make a difference in your kids' lives." I'm saying there are things that will never happen if you don't pray. There are things that aren't going to happen in your neighbors' lives and in your families' lives if you don't pray about it.



But we need to have earnest prayer. What is *earnest prayer*? I don't do this a lot, but the Greek word means to stretch or to strain. Earnest prayer is desperate prayer. See, I've been a Christian for 22 years, and my prayer life has a lot of ups and downs. I personally don't think the center of prayer is discipline.

Go ahead and have your prayer time, your prayer chair, your prayer journal, your prayer accountability partner, and your prayer book. I think it's all great. I have not seen the needle move a lot in my life with prayer with discipline. What creates a prayerful heart is not discipline but desperation. The truth is we're not desperate enough. Actually, the real truth is we get desperate way too late.

You look at some marriage, and you go, "You needed to be desperate about the condition of your marriage about 10 years ago. That's when the 'on your knees, crying out' prayers needed to start, not when the divorce attorney has been called and he moved out, although God is gracious." The problem with us is we're not desperate enough for God to move.

The second thing about earnest prayer is earnest prayer dreams. It's stretching. I'm stretched, and I'm stretching what I'm going to believe. You need to dream for your one. Like, you're dreaming for your one. You're like, "She lives in another state, and she's an atheist." Well, then, you're going to dream bigger things than she comes to Christ.

You're going to pray that she comes to Christ and leads all of her friends to Christ. You're going to pray that she comes to Christ and it finally has the impact on your family you've been praying for for years and, actually, it's what leads your daughter to Christ because she idolizes your sister. You just start dreaming.

Why don't we dream? I'll tell you why you don't dream: because then you can be disappointed. You'd rather just be in the fog. Why would you dream? Because if you dream, then you're like, "This is exactly what I want to happen, and if it doesn't happen, I'm going to be so heartbroken." Well, then, be heartbroken. Let's dream together. Let's pray some big prayers.

So, they have this earnest prayer. They go to God in prayer. I want you to see what happens here. Verse 6: "***Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping...***" Peter struggles with narcolepsy. Have you seen this? He sleeps at the Mount of Transfiguration. He sleeps in the garden. He's sleeping here.

Guys, he is chained to two soldiers. Some of you can't sleep unless it's 68 degrees and you have three pillows. I know how you guys are. He is in prison, chained, to be executed tomorrow. He's sleeping. "***...bound with two chains...***" Now here's the thing. Sleep is a form of trust. Sleep is to your day what death is to your life.

You say, "Lord, I've done it all. I've tried to be faithful. I'm now going to lay to rest. I'm now going to trust in him who does not sleep or slumber. I'm going to be reminded every night when I need seven or eight hours of sleep that I am not God." So he can sleep. Now, people ask, "Why can he sleep?" I think there are two answers. I think they're both true.

The first is people notice that if you look at what Jesus says to Peter in John 21, talking about Peter's death, he says, "Peter, when you are old, someone will take you to a place you don't want to go." Peter knew he was talking about his death. So, Peter might be sitting in prison, going, "Jesus said when I'm old. I'm not old yet. I'm going to get out of here."

So, some people think (and I think it's a good principle) he remembered the words of Christ, he remembered the promises of God, and he was comforted. I think it's probably more the second thing. Because what is sleep? Sleep is the picture of peace. When you see someone sleeping, you're like, "Ah." It's like the picture of rest and peace.

He had peace because somebody else was praying for him. I don't think he even knew they were praying for him. I mean, they're not texting. He doesn't get a phone call from jail. You have no idea how much your prayers might be affecting other people, and you have no idea how much people praying for you is affecting you.

Some of you are like, "I don't struggle with anxiety." Yeah, because your mom prays for you every day. That's why you don't struggle with anxiety. You have no idea that it might be someone else's faithful prayers for you that are actually having an influence on your life.

Okay. So, he's sleeping, and now look at what happens. Verse 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..."*** So, he's in a deep sleep. ***"...and woke him..."*** His alarm clock is an angel. That's how it works for 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.' When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary..."***

So, he's like, "I've got to go." He knew that was where the church was gathered. ***"...the mother of John whose other name was Mark..."*** So, this is Mary. She's wealthy. We know she's wealthy because she has multiple gates to get into her home. She's the mother of John Mark, who wrote the gospel of Mark. ***"...where many were gathered together and were praying."***

Listen. There are three things about prevailing prayer. The first thing we see is they were earnest. The second thing is they were consistent. They are still praying for Peter to get out of prison. They haven't given up. What do you need to keep praying for? Or maybe the question is...*What have you stopped praying for?* Or maybe the question is...*What do you need to start praying for?*

By the way, this is why it says, "Earnest prayer to God was made by the church." We need each other in prayer. Sometimes in prayer, you're believing and I'm not believing. Other times, I'm believing and you're not believing. Other times, neither of us is believing, but some third person is believing. I think what changes a family is not when Mom prays and Dad prays but when Mom and Dad pray together, and what changes a neighborhood is when families pray, and what changes a city is when churches pray.

So, they have this consistent prayer, but look at what happens. Verse 13: ***"And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda..."*** Her real name is Rose. That's what that means. ***"...came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate."***

So, this young girl goes back, and she goes, "Guys, hey, listen. Let me interrupt your prayer meeting. Sorry about this, guys. Listen. You know how we've been praying for Peter to be released from prison? It worked. He's here. God answered our prayers." Unfortunately, they respond the same way we do about prayer. Look here.

***"They said to her, '[You're crazy!] You are out of your mind.' But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, 'It is his angel!'"*** Translation: "It's his ghost. He's dead. It didn't work, guys." ***"But Peter continued knocking..."*** It's easier for Peter to get out of prison than into a prayer meeting. This is what's happening here. ***"...and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed."***

So, we need to pray earnestly. (They were.) We need to pray consistently. (They were.) Here's what they were not doing. They were not praying expectantly. I guess it's possible, even in the most passionate prayer meetings, for there to be a spirit of

unbelief and doubt. We don't believe in "name it, claim it, gab it, grab it," but we do believe there is something powerful in believing prayer, in expectant prayer, and saying, "God, I believe you're going to work."

I mean, I remember one time there was this wrestler at Duke I was trying to meet with. If you know Duke's campus, it's three campuses. It's big. People are everywhere. I remember walking across campus, and I was like, "Lord, I want to meet him. I need to talk to him about the gospel." One minute later, I see him walking toward me. I'm like, "Wow!"

That's what we should be doing. We should be praying with our eyes open, looking for the answers. One of the things that will build your faith is answered prayer. So, you have a prayer journal. "Here's what I'm trusting God for. Here's what I'm praying for." Then you mark it when God answers it, and you share it with others.

So, here's what happens. Here's how it ends. ***"But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison."*** He had an answered prayer story. ***"And he said, 'Tell these things to James and to the brothers.' Then he departed and went to another place."***

This is really the end of hearing about Peter in the rest of the book of Acts. We hear a little bit about him in chapter 15, but it transitions. Peter is going to go on to have his own ministry, to write two books of the Bible. Did you notice when everything changed in this story was in chapter 12, verse 5, with two words...*but prayer?*

I don't know how all this works in the sovereignty, providence, and mystery of God, but if the church doesn't pray, Peter doesn't get out of prison. If Peter doesn't get out of prison, he's executed. If he's executed, he doesn't have a ministry. If he doesn't have a ministry, we don't have 1 and 2 Peter. There are some things that only happen by prayer.

So, what we're trying to do... We thought at the end of this, with this text and this reality... We're trying to grow in being a praying church, a prevailing, praying church. We thought, "We're just going to end this service by praying together." Now, how are we going to do that? Well, in just a few minutes, I'm going to call up the elders of our church. The elders are the spiritual leaders of our church.

When they get up here in just a few minutes, when you see them, I want you to think one word: *Barnabas*. That's what they are. They are men who are here to encourage you, to represent the church, and to pray with you. We believe prayer makes a difference. We really do. And we don't just believe prayer makes a difference; we believe that, actually, there are certain things that won't happen if we don't pray.

But we have a deeper belief under all that. We believe God hears our prayers. God leans over and listens to our prayers and responds. Sometimes he answers "Yes," sometimes he answers "No," and sometimes he answers "Later," but the Bible says there are only two things God collects of his children on earth that we have written down in Scripture. God collects our tears and our prayers, and sometimes they come together.

So, here's what we're going to do, guys. We are going to come together and pray for our "ones." Here's what this means. The elders are going to be up here. We're going to sing two songs, and I want you to come forward. As soon as we start singing the first song, you're going to feel like, "I've got to come forward for my one. I know I do." But then you're going to have this other voice in your head. "Nah, I'm not going to come forward." Who do you think that is? You have to come forward for your one.

Okay. Here's what we're going to do. You might say, "Okay..." The sheet we gave you at the beginning... Those are some things you can pray for your one. You're like, "Here's what I need to pray." You know exactly what you need to pray. It's like, "Okay. I pray that God would open up their eyes. I pray they would believe the Scripture."

Some of you, by the way, don't live near the person you're trying to reach. You're brokenhearted that your daughter or your dad, or someone, lives somewhere else. You know what? We're going to come together with you, and we're going to pray that God sends a laborer into their life, that God sends some Christian who they don't even know into their life.

For other people, we're going to pray that they believe the Word of God, that they're convicted of their sin. For some of you, we're going to pray the Jonah prayer. Do you know the Jonah prayer? Jonah is running away from God on a ship, and the Jonah prayer is, "God, destroy the ship. Save the sinner." It's a dangerous prayer. "Lord, destroy the very thing the person I love is running away from you on."

So, some of you are going to come forward for that one person whose name you dropped in the basket. Others of you are going to come forward for yourself, and here's what I mean. You know God has to do something in your life for you to reach this person. Some of you are going to come forward and go, "I need to pray for courage, because I have lunch Tuesday. I know what I need to say. I just need the courage to say it."

Some of you are going to come forward, and you're going to say, "You know what I need? I need wisdom and discernment, because I know in week one we said 'Pray, guess, go,' but I don't know. There are, like, four different ways I could go." We're going to pray for you. Some of you put your name down on the card. I don't even

know what that means for you and where you are, but you're going to come forward and just get prayer for yourself.

We are going to be a culture that prays. Jesus said, "Ask. Seek. Knock." Did you notice it gets more intense? You ask, and when you don't get the answer, then you start seeking, and when you don't start finding, you start knocking on other people's doors. "Have you seen?"

So, together, we're going to ask, we're going to seek, and we're going to knock. I want to invite the elders to come forward. In just a minute, I'm going to ask you to stand and pray with me. Then we're going to sing a song, and I want you to come forward. We want to create a culture of prevailing prayer. Please stand.

Lord, we ask, we seek, and we knock. James says in his epistle, which is a terrifying reality, we have not because we ask not. Lord, I believe by faith that tomorrow will be different because of the prayers we pray today. Lord, would you create a culture where we stop believing that prayer doesn't make a difference and start believing it makes a huge difference?

Lord, would you create a culture of prevailing prayer where prayer is earnest, where prayer is believing, where prayer is consistent, and where prayer is expectant? Would you work in the lives of our "ones"? They're all over Winston and all over the United States right now, and they have no idea we're setting aside this place and this time to seek your face on their behalf. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.