

Session 2

THE CHURCH DEMONSTRATES PRAYERFUL DEPENDENCE

Acts 1:12-14; 12:3-16; James 5:16

Memory Verse

They all were continually united in prayer, along with the women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

– ACTS 1:14, CSB



The Church Demonstrates Prayerful Dependence

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Prayer, both individually and in community, is a vital attribute of a healthy church.

CALL TO ACTION: This is a great Sunday to have folks group up and pray together before the service is over. Also, challenge them to make a special effort to pray with other believers this week. Put it on the calendar!

In his book *The Secret of Guidance*, F.B. Meyer wrote, “The great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but un-offered prayer.”¹

This idea prompts us to consider: How seriously do we take prayer? Is prayer a neglected spiritual discipline? If our capacity to do and manage things in our lives is a finite container, it is tempting to have it filled to the brim with little time and space for quiet things like prayer, but Scripture teaches that prayer is vital and worth prioritizing.

Prayer is the first action we see the believers take after Jesus commissioned them to be His witnesses in Acts 1:8. We’ll explore this and other examples of prayer today.



How effective have you found prayer in your life? What has contributed to this view?

What role do you think prayer plays in a healthy church?

Session Summary


Today's main passage in Acts 1 reminds us a healthy church is continually united in prayer. Unity doesn't mean always agreeing or getting along, but it does mean prioritizing peace and seeking compromise for the good of the kingdom. This takes continual work!

The book of James teaches us to "pray for one another" (James 5:16). When we pray for one another, we do so privately and in community, but it is vital regardless. James further explained that "the prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect" (James 5:16).

In Acts 12, we see dedication in prayer in action with the church coming together to pray for an imprisoned Peter. Luke records that they prayed fervently together, and their prayers were answered during that very prayer meeting!

Prayer, both individually and in community, is a vital component of our faith. It is an important component of a healthy church and is necessary to carry out the mission God gave us to share the good news with the nations.

1. United in Prayer (Acts 1:12-14)

 What does it tell us about the priority of prayer that it was the first step Jesus's followers took after His ascension?

 Why is it important that this was a united act and not just one or two people in the group on their own?

In Acts 1:9, Jesus ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives, and at the start of our passage, the disciples returned to Jerusalem as Jesus commanded (v. 4). Luke's gospel also records this event, saying that "after worshiping him, they returned to

Jerusalem with great joy” (Luke 24:52) and they “were continually in the temple praising God” (Luke 24:53).

Luke indicated those present at this time in Acts 1 were:

The Remaining Eleven: The remaining eleven disciples were present. The twelfth disciple was Judas, Jesus’s betrayer, who had already died at this point (Matthew 27:3–10).

Women: Luke records that Mary the mother of Jesus along with other unnamed women were present (v. 14). There were no women among Jesus’s twelve apostles, but Jesus had female disciples (or students) and followers, and the gospels record that women traveled with Jesus during His ministry (Luke 8:1-3).

Jesus’s Brothers: John 7:5 records that Jesus’s brothers did not believe in Him during His earthly ministry, so we can assume that they came to believe in and follow Jesus after His resurrection.

In verse 14, Luke recorded that the group was “continually united in prayer.” What an important posture for this group of believers! Let’s break this down further.

“Continually United”: The Greek phrase used to communicate the unity of the group—*homothymadon*, which means “with one mind”²—is found six times in the book of Acts.³ The New Testament continually teaches the importance of unity in the church (1 Corinthians 1:10; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 2:2).

A united church better glorifies God and is more effective in ministry. Jesus had recently given these believers a mission to go and make disciples of the nations (the Great Commission; Matthew 28:18-20), and in Acts 1:8, Jesus told them they would be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. To complete these tasks effectively as Christ commanded, unity was essential.


It is just as essential for us today. Being united doesn’t mean we must all believe the same thing or agree on everything. The fact of the matter is we won’t, but we are to agree on the most important things—the truth of the gospel and that we are called to share it—and continue the mission the early church began.

Not only was this group of believers united, but they were also continually united. This wasn't a one-time thing. They weren't only united when everyone was getting along or when they were gathered weekly. They were continually united. Being united on an ongoing basis is hard. A healthy church doesn't always get it right, but they also don't quit working toward this.

“In Prayer”: Unity is an essential element of success for a body of believers, and so is prayer. Continuous unity in prayer strengthened the early church for the challenging days and mission ahead.

Note how the believers in Acts followed what Jesus Himself modeled. Prayer was an important hallmark of Jesus's earthly ministry. Luke 5:16 notes that Jesus “often withdrew to deserted places and prayed.” Once, He was praying for so long that people began to worry and went to search for Him (Mark 1:35-37).

When facing the hardest moment of His life on earth, the crucifixion, Jesus devoted Himself to prayer in the garden at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). Jesus knew the importance of prayer, and not only did He model it, but He also taught His disciples the importance of it (Luke 18:1-8).

 Application: What would it look like for our group to be “united in prayer”?

2. Together in Prayer (James 5:16)

James 5:16 gives us another model for a healthy church: True Christian community should be a safe space to confess our sins to one another, and the response to that confession should be prayer. We live in a time where we see public figures routinely get “canceled” when they fail, but that's not what Scripture tells us godly community should look like.

 What connection did James make between confession and healing? How have you experienced this reality?

James's implication here isn't that the confession of all sin should be public, though some sin may call for that. Rather, James 5:16 tells us the humble confession of sin, followed by prayer, results in healing. Sometimes this healing is physical, but it is always spiritual.

Let's look deeper into the role of prayer here. When we confess our sins, we aren't at our proudest moment. In fact, in some cases, this is a very low moment. A healthy church creates a safe space for this. When we are struggling, when we are hurting or at our lowest, the church is called to pray. Don't mistake this type of prayer for inaction. Sometimes additional action may be called for, but prayer is a vital, powerful step we must always take.

? How have you seen that, "The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect"?

This call to pray for one another is echoed elsewhere in the New Testament, too (1 Thessalonians 1:2; Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 1:3). Prayer is important and powerful. James specified that powerful prayer comes from a righteous person. Being righteous doesn't mean we are perfect—the Bible is full of cautionary tales of righteous people who missed the mark—but it does mean we pray earnestly and sincerely while striving to live in a Christlike manner. When we pray this way, we have a correct understanding of God as just and right though we are often not (Psalm 89:14). When we pray this way, our hearts are in the right place.

? Application: How are we to apply this verse in our daily lives and time together as a church?

3. Fervent in Prayer (Acts 12:5-16)

? The church immediately turned to prayer once Peter was imprisoned. How likely are we to turn to prayer as our first option in times of trouble?

After King Herod arrested Peter, something miraculous happens. Peter was kept in chains under heavy guard (vv. 4,6), but the Lord had other plans. On the night he was supposed to be brought out to trial, an angel rescued Peter from jail, breaking his chains and leading him out to the street. Peter went to the home of Mary, John Mark's mom. He startled the servant Rhoda, who (rather humorously), in her haste to tell everyone Peter was at the door, didn't open the door immediately and left him standing at the gate.

This is just one of the amazing stories of God working in the book of Acts, but let's look closely at how the church reacts to Peter's misfortune:

“The church was praying fervently to God for him” (v. 5). Jesus taught to pray without giving up, and here the believers were, using the only weapon at their disposal to help Peter: fervent prayer.⁴ They were praying earnestly and intensely.⁵ When was the last time you would describe your prayers that way?

Peter's arrest happened on the heels of the execution of James the brother of John (v. 2). These believers had every reason to think Peter would be next in line for martyrdom, but they knew and believed the Lord could help, so they fervently asked Him to do so. God doesn't always answer our fervent prayers with a “yes,” but in this case, He did so in a miraculous way.

“Many had assembled and were praying” (v. 12). Luke records that “many had assembled” to pray for Peter during his hour of need. In verse 6, we learn that Peter's trial was supposed to happen that very night, so the church gathered to pray. They knew the power of prayer, and their prayers were answered even before they parted from their gathering.

 **How has your prayer life grown through praying alongside other believers?**

The way God works often looks different than Peter's divine rescue. Sometimes our prayers are answered quickly, while other times we must wait for God's purpose and timing. Whatever the situation, a healthy church joining together in prayer is powerful.

? Application: In Acts, the church came together in Peter's time of need. What would it look like for us to do the same for those in need in our church?

Conclusion

Today's passage reminds us of the importance of a unified, praying church. Prayer is essential. In Scripture we see the importance of two different types of prayer: individual prayer (as modeled consistently by Jesus, who would go off on His own to pray and have private time with the Father) and corporate prayer, or prayer in community (as modeled by the believers in Acts 1). Both are important and necessary for the church.

When was the last time you prayed over our group's prayer list outside of a Sunday morning? When you tell someone you'll be praying for them or their situation, do you actually do it? If you struggle with this, you aren't alone. Instead of feeling shame, give this struggle over to God and ask for His help as you work to build this habit.

While skeptics may see prayer as a step of inaction, we know, and Scripture teaches, that it is anything but. While some situations do require other action, praying for a situation is the most powerful thing we can do. When we pray, we know that the One who can make the difference in a situation isn't us, but the Lord.

In Acts 12, we explored the story of the church joining in prayer for Peter after he was arrested. Luke recorded that "the church was praying fervently to God for him" (v. 5) and that they joined together in prayer (v. 12). In this case, prayer was more powerful than the prison chains and guards Herod had set in place. The prayers of the gathered believers were answered during the very prayer meeting they were attending.

Prayer is crucial to the function of the church body and is not to be neglected in our lives, personally or communally.

❓ How have you seen the effectiveness of prayer, personally or in community?

❓ How can we commit to prayer for one another on an ongoing basis?

❓ How might fervent united prayer give us more opportunities to share the gospel with others?

Memorize

They all were continually united in prayer, along with the women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

- Acts 1:14, CSB

References

¹F. B. Meyer, quoted in Calvin Wittman, “Sermon: The Prayer Life of a Christian - Colossians 4,” Lifeway.com, January 27, 2014, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-prayer-life-of-a-christian-colossians-4>.

²Blue Letter Bible, “Strong’s G3661 – homothymadon,” accessed March 11, 2025 <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3661/csb/mgnt/0-1/>.

³Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Dynamic: Experience the Power of God’s People* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1987), 25.

⁴Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on Acts, 2025 Edition,” Soniclight.com, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/html/acts/acts.htm>.

⁵Blue Letter Bible, “Strong’s G1619 – ektenōs,” accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1619/csb/mgnt/0-1/>.