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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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IDOP Sunday 2014

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father God, we do thank you and praise you for your grace and for your goodness; and today in particular, Lord, we want to thank you for the place that we have here in this country, here in this town where we can meet and we can praise and we can speak your word, and we can listen and we can learn without any fear whatsoever. And Lord today we just again want to reach out to all of our brothers and sisters around the world who can't say that and can't do that. So we pray this morning as we again look into your word, look into the workings of IDOP Sunday that you would give us the grace and the wisdom to truly make this something that changes our lives. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, as I alluded, this is the IDOP Sunday. Actually it's the first Sunday of the month. We do communion on that first Sunday, so we push it off to the second one, and IDOP really is I-D-O-P, it stand for the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. And IDOP is really about two very distinct and critical issues that the church is called to, one of them is prayer and the

other is the persecuted church, and this is the Sunday where we are attempting to put both of those together. It's a day where we turn our attention to prayer for those who are willing to pay the price of publicly acknowledging Christ. And this morning I want to revisit the teaching on IDOP that I give each year. And if it sounds familiar it's because it's essentially what I taught last year, just kind of updated for this year. There's just too much important material in this for me to move on to something else at that time, and pursuant to that, I want to kind of give a "state of the church" opinion as to how we are doing when it comes to issues such as the persecuted church and prayer.

So bear with me if you've heard this before, but first again let me restate the official IDOP pronouncement. This is what they say. It says: "The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church is a global day of intercession for persecuted Christians worldwide. Its primary focus is the work of intercessory prayer and citizen action on behalf of persecuted communities of the Christian faith. We also encourage prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it. IDOP began in 1996 through the efforts of the World Evangelical Fellowship in cooperation with a variety of denominations and faith-based organizations. From a core group of approximately 7,000 churches, the IDOP has grown to be the largest

prayer day event of its kind in the world. The IDOP is a rallying point for Christians and others to stand behind those who suffer for their faith by providing prayer support and appropriate advocacy."

We need a day like today. And we need a day like today because we are easily distracted from this task. Last time out I asked why is it so critical to get our heads and our hearts and our hands into this idea that the persecuted church deserves our passionate commitment? The first question I raised was our heads. And my question was a sports question. If you remember I said, is your head in the game? Is your head in the game? You know, that may sound like a strange question at first but, you know, having had lots of kids who were into lots of sports and being around a lot of coaches, I heard that statement many, many times spoken to players. Hey, is your head in the game? I mean, it's a less than polite way of asking: Do you really care about what is going on all around you?

Now Wesley's football team has been extremely hot, last Friday notwithstanding, that was a tough one, but they've had a great season this year. They've had a six-game winning streak and a lot of that is because Wesley's got his head in the game. You see, he's the quarterback, and if he didn't really care about the game,

well then all the talent that he had in the world wouldn't matter. I mean, if he wasn't mentally prepared to compete, if he didn't put the effort in to focus his mind on the task at hand, it wouldn't really matter how skilled he was, he was going to fail. When it comes to the persecuted church, it is crucial that we have our heads in the game because the stakes are infinitely higher on both sides of the issue. It is the persecuted church who desperately needs our prayer, and there is us to desperately need to pray. And to do that we first have to get our head into the game of praying for the persecuted church. Gospel for Asia says this about us. It says: "Americans who have not experienced persecution do not fully understand what it means to have their lives threatened, homes destroyed, rights violated and loved ones imprisoned, all because of embracing faith in Jesus Christ." It's true. We don't.

This morning I want to address the same question that I addressed a year ago. It is the heart question that I address every year basically at this time, and it goes to the heart of what IDOP is looking for from you and me, and it's about prayer, and it's the question that I think lingers in the minds of most of us with regard to this type of prayer and the question is, basically put, why should I? I mean, if we are -- to put this cynically, if God truly is sovereign, why does he need us to pray for somebody on the other side of the world? I mean why can't we just say that part of

the Lord's prayer that covers it all? Why can't we just say, "Lord, thy kingdom come, thy will be done" and be done with it? I mean after all it is his kingdom, right, and it is ultimately his will, so how can we imagine a sovereign God is somehow stopped in his tracks at what he wants to do by my failure to pray? Well, the answer is he's not. But he still insists that we pray. And I'd like to give the organizers of IDOP a chance to address that issue in particular. This is their official statement on why prayer is so critical for the persecuted church. This is what they say. They say: "We believe that prayer changes things. Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith. God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing. Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray."

This morning I want to revisit the heart part of this message by unpacking that statement line by line. The first statement says: "We believe that prayer changes things." I want to start that off with one example. Our example is Saeed Abedini. Now, we have been praying for Saeed for a few years now, and if you don't know, if you haven't heard, he was an American citizen that was in Iran, he was helping out an orphanage, he got pulled off a bus, he was given a sham trial and he was thrown in prison for years. We have been praying for him literally now for years. And you could make the

argument that since we've been praying for Pastor Abedini, things have gotten much worse. *World Magazine* reported this a few years back, it said: "Iranian American Pastor Saeed Abedini, imprisoned in Tehran for his faith, has been moved to one of the country's most brutal prisons, according to his U.S.-based legal team." Now you may recall that recently we participated in a worldwide event where everybody in churches all around the world were encouraged to pray for grace and for strength for Pastor Abedini. And if you remember there was a lot of hope, and we had hoped for his eventual release. Well, instead things have only gotten much, much worse. This past year, the Iranian government has cracked down on Saeed's family. In fact, they've cracked down so intensely on his mother that she just recently had to flee the country which again leaves him isolated in one of the worst prisons in the world, and in addition, we now know that there are members of ISIS who have infiltrated that prison with the intent to kill Saeed. So the question is all right, so how do we pray for Pastor Abedini? This is where we as believers have to get our heads into the game. And we've been able to do that somewhat and to grow in our ability to understand that somewhat by reading books like Nik Ripken's *The Insanity of God*. As somebody who ministers to persecuted people, he's been giving us an insight as to how we are to pray for persecuted Christians. And it's an insight I've never heard before. This is what Ripken says. It says: "For decades the

Western church has been taught to pray and work for an end to the persecutions of fellow believers around the world. We enlist our congregations, our denominations, and even our governments to speak out and pressure oppressive regimes and hostile nations to end discrimination. Sometimes we even demand the persecutors be punished." Okay. If that's where our prayer begins and ends, I'd be the first one to admit it's been a total failure when it comes to Saeed Abedini. I mean, his lot has only gotten worse the more we have prayed. But here's what Ripken has to say about what the persecuted themselves really want in our prayer. He says this: "We seem to forgot that Jesus himself promised that the world would reject and mistreat his faithful followers just as it rejected him. Ruth" -- that's his wife -- "and I have seldom encountered a mature believer living in persecution who asked us to pray that their persecution would cease. We have never heard that request." And incidentally they interviewed over 700 persecuted saints. He goes on to say: "Rather, believers in persecution ask us to pray that they would be faithful and obedient through their persecution and suffering." That is a radically different prayer.

Now, Saeed was imprisoned at Evin Prison which is a notoriously bad place, and he sent his wife Naghmeh a letter that confirms what Ripken had said about persecuted believers. In that letter we saw there was no request that the persecution would end. Rather there

was this type of acknowledgment. This is what he said, this is Saeed himself. He says: "I forgave the prison doctor who did not listen to me and who did not give me the medication that I needed. I forgave the interrogator who beat me. Every day when I would see the interrogator and for the last time when I saw him, I forgave him. I smiled at him and with respect shook his hand and said my good-bye. The minute I forgave them and loved them, that second I was filled with unspeakable joy." I want you to just take a second and imagine what this must be like. This is not somebody who was just born there, raised there and imprisoned there. This is somebody who was a citizen of the United States living in the mid-west and yet in the middle of that hideous prison we find him saying that he was filled with unspeakable joy. You know, it's God alone who gives that grace and the grace that he gives is always in response to prayer. Our church and others have been praying continuously for Pastor Abedini only to find out the following. This is again from World Magazine, it says: "Guards at Evin Prison told a family member who went to visit Abedini today that the pastor had been moved to Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj, about 90 minutes outside the nation's capital. Guards there told Abedini's family he was not allowed to have visitors," which is to say, in other words he's been moved from a really, really bad prison to one that was even worse. It says: "Rajai Shahr is known to house the country's worst criminals -- murderers and rapists. Lawyers with

The American Center for Law and Justice, who represent Abedini's wife, say he now faces life-threatening conditions. A Dutch diplomat who visited the prison in 2005 described it as a place where political prisoners are sent for the most severe punishment. Because many of the criminals housed there already face the death penalty, violence between inmates is common."

Just imagine being in that place. So we ask ourself does -- all right, so does prayer really change things? I mean, many have been praying for Pastor Abedini's release from prison and that clearly has not happened. But there's a reason why he has been transferred from prison to prison. You see, Saeed's wife Naghmeh has revealed that 30 prisoners at Evin Prison have come to Christ. That was just last year. I mean who knows who have -- those who have subsequently come to Christ through Saeed. I mean, we know for a fact that there are now 30 people in that prison who know the only way to be right with God is Jesus Christ and they know that it's no longer the five pillars of Islam. I mean, they've learned something through Pastor Abedini that was absolutely unthinkable to a Muslim mindset. I mean, they learned that God has become a man, that he lived his life out perfectly on this earth and that he offered up his life as the perfect sacrifice for my sin and he offered it up on the cross. I mean, these men learned in one of the darkest places on the entire planet that while they were still

sinners, Jesus Christ had died for them. You see, it's because Pastor Abedini's been so effective that he's been sent from one place to another. And we've learned now from scripture that our task is to imagine the horror of the place that he's in. God wants us to put ourselves physically in his shoes trying to imagine the fear, the anxiety, even the despair that would haunt such a place as he's in. And God calls us to exercise that because we are connected to Pastor Abedini through the body of Christ, and God wants us to care as much about his fate as we care about the parts of our own body. *Hebrews 13:3* says: *Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you are also in the body.* So we are called to pray but our prayers have changed drastically over the years. We are called to pray that he has the grace, the strength, and the supernatural power to understand that he has a ministry in that prison and to channel the light of Christ even more intensely into the darkness that he has been thrust into. May I suggest to you that as recently as a few years ago we didn't even know how we should be praying for persecuted saints. We've been praying this way for a few years now, and as we have prayed, God has enlarged our vision of just what it is we are praying for. So yes, we can affirm the very first statement, we believe that prayer changes things. True. Absolutely true.

The second statement says: Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith. Now to repeat what I said last time, here's the big picture. The big picture is that all answered prayer begins and it ends in the throne room of God. And when we pray, we really are part of a very complex process that God uses to move things on earth. You know, if God wants to move a mountain, he doesn't just move a mountain. The first thing he does is he moves people to pray that that mountain would be moved and then in answer to prayer he moves the mountain. Prayer is somewhat like the inner workings of a cell that is far more complex, it is far more wonderful than it appears on the surface. And I've described this whole process just as a means of trying to grasp what's going on, as an electric circuit. You know, current only flows in a circuit when it's complete. If there's any break in it, the current stops. Well, the current flows from the throne room of God through us and then back to the Father for an answer. I mean, forgive me for trying to boil down a series of sermons on prayer to just a few minutes, but here's basically what I was trying to say. There's parts to this circuit and the way the circuit works is the Father initiates, the Holy Spirit translates and intercedes, we participate, Jesus advocates, and then the Father responds.

Just to break that down a little bit: The father initiates.

Everything that we do we do because the Father has started it,

begun it, even our desire to pray and what we're praying for. It all starts in the throne room of God. *Philippians 2:13* says: *For it is God who works in you, both to will and to do for His good pleasure.* So God is the source of everything we do, including our desires to pray. Well, that's a start. Secondly the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit intercedes, the Holy Spirit translates as God has moved us to pray. *Romans 8:26* says this, it says: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.* This is an incredible statement. I mean, think about this for a second. What God is saying is your role in prayer is so critical, is so crucial, that the Holy Spirit comes down alongside us to guide us, understanding we don't know what we're doing. We don't know how to do this but the Spirit comes alongside us guiding us in that process to translate and empower our words. So we participate. The Father initiates, the Spirit translates, we participate. *Ephesians 6:18* tells us we are to be: *Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.* So we pray. And as we pray, Jesus advocates. Jesus says: *My little children, these things I write to you, so is that you may not sin. And if I*

anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

So here we have this whole process of the Father initiating, the Holy Spirit translating, we participating, Jesus advocating, and then coming back to the Father for an answer, and this is how the Father answers. It's in *2 Thessalonians 1:11*, it says this, it says: *To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power.* Okay. So that's how God answers the prayer and then the very next verse he tells us why it is that we do it this way. In verse 12 he says: *So that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.* You see, I'm not saying it's an electrical circuit but it helps me to think of it that way. And what is amazing about this process is that this circuit is involving the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and right in the middle of this circuit is this switch and the switch consists of human beings. The Father initiates, the Holy Spirit translates, we participate, Jesus advocates, the Father answers. Now for God's own glory and for reasons known to God alone, he has elected to run that circuit through human beings.

Now, the second statement is: Exactly what happens is a mystery of

faith. It's a mystery. I'm just trying to get a handle on some small part of it. But the great mystery is that God would make us such a critical part of this work on earth. Statement three says: God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing. And let me tell you why. It's because God stoops to conquer! You know, there's no question that anything we can do God can do better. Not just better but infinitely better. So we raise the question: Why in the world would God waste all the time and effort by inviting us to pray to him? I mean, why does God stoop such to involve us in his plan? Well, I think it has to do with who God has chosen to defeat the enemy. He has chosen us. He has tasked us with that. Listen to *2 Corinthians 4:5*, it says this: *For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.* What God is saying here is that we've been given the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and we've been given it to show the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

Now, I've often described our lives, our lives here on earth as we are the nexus, we are the ultimate connection in a proxy war that

is being played out between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. When Satan cursed all of creation, it all fell through Adam. And Jesus took on flesh and he became one of us and he became the second Adam and by his cross he is leading us as we take back the kingdom from Satan through prayer. You know, it's as if God told Satan that his ultimate defeat would come not just through his hands -- here's the amazing part -- but through ours as well. I mean after all, Satan's ultimate defeat came at the hands of Jesus Christ who was God become a man. So God tells us that our role in this battle is unique, it is significant, and it's going to be accomplished: *Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the LORD of hosts.*

So God stoops to conquer and he stoops primarily through prayer. And I'm still awestruck that God has chosen us as the means to his ends. We have all kinds of examples in scripture where God goes to extraordinary lengths to involve us and our puny efforts when he could have done it on his own. I mean, we consider God's treatment of Noah and the ark. You know, God made the entire universe in six days and then he tells his servant to build an ark, and the scripture tells us he just waited and waited and waited years and years and years until it was built. God clearly thought far more of the importance of Noah's input than he did about efficiency. Now I've said this before but it bears repeating, God using Noah to

build an ark is like me using a hamster to plow a field all for the sake of the hamster. That's really what it's like. I mean, there's got to be an easier way for God. But God never chooses on the basis of ease or efficiency. I mean, we think about Satan himself, I mean, I've asked this question many, many: Why didn't God just take Satan out at the very beginning? I mean, the very first time he rebelled -- boom! You're done. Didn't happen. Why did God become one of us, live a spotless life and die the death we deserved to die instead of judging Satan's sin instantly? I mean, wouldn't that have solved all of these problems? Well, it would have solved a problem but it would not have solved God's problem because God's problem, it's us. We're God's problem. See, we are the crown of his creation. And God makes us temporarily a little lower than the angels, but that's just temporary. He tells us in *1 Corinthians 6:3*: *Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?* So we who are going to judge angels in the next life are called on to engage them in this one through prayer. And the reason why is like I said, we are engaged in a proxy war and the proxy war is between two supernatural superpowers, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. And God chooses to defeat the kingdom of darkness by engaging his image bearers in the front line of that war. The bottom line is God could have destroyed Satan instantly. I mean after all, he created Satan. But instead he chooses to defeat

Satan through the agency of human beings. And the reason why is because God tells us his strength is made perfect through our weakness.

So God has chosen his weapon, his weapon of choice is you and me, that is the church of Jesus Christ, and he's very blunt about telling us this is war and you are part of it. In *2 Corinthians 10* he says: *For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh.* In *Ephesians 6:12* he says: *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.* So like it or not, God has tied his kingdom into our prayer. And that's why God says in *1 Thessalonians 5:17*: *Pray without ceasing;* in *Philippians 4:6* he says: *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.* In *Colossians 4:2* he says: *Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.* And we know *James 5:16*: *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.* And we're going to see shortly in the future just how Elijah proved that on Mt. Carmel. But this is what God is showing us constantly in scripture. He's trying to draw us in. He's saying you are the weapon. You are what I am using to defeat the kingdom of darkness. And he gives us

a literal picture of the power of prayer during Israel's very first battle. It was a sneak attack on their rear flank by the Amalekites. They are the offspring of Esau, and they were bitter foes then, they are bitter foes today. They are the forebearers of the present Arab world which still obviously bitterly hates the Jews. Exodus describes this battle.

This is *Exodus 17:9*, it says this: *And Moses said to Joshua, "Choose us some men to go out, and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.* This is an incredible picture that God is painting. It's a visual picture that God is trying to get us to see here. And what he's saying is uplifted hands is the universal symbol of prayer. And so with prayer with hands uplifted, victory is at hand and when the hands start to droop and fatigue sets in, defeat is at hand. But notice it's not the warriors who are

getting exhausted here, it's not the archers, it's not the Charioteers, it's not the swordsmen who are growing weary -- it's Moses! It's the prayer warrior. It's the guy who's praying. And God wants Israel to know that their very survival as a nation is a function of prayer. I think it's safe to say we're never going to know this side of heaven how crucial our prayers are to the churches that are still under attack today. And Moses grew physically exhausted. We grow mentally and spiritually exhausted because we don't understand the cause, so we doubt our effect.

Let me give you another example of how important the human connection to God is. I've said this before but it bears repetition. It's one of my favorite parts in scripture. This is from Acts 10. We have the story of Peter and Cornelius. It's a firsthand account of the power of prayer and it's also a firsthand account of the power of human beings being drawn into this process by God. We have Cornelius who's a Gentile. He's a devout man, he's a righteous man, he's seeking God in prayer. Acts 10:1-4 says this, it says: *There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" And when he observed*

him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God." Right off the bat the first thing I would say is how's that for an answer to prayer? You're praying and suddenly an angel appears. Hey, we hear you, it's coming up right before the throne room, we see it. It's amazing. God then tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa to go find Peter. And he even gives Cornelius directions to where Peter is staying. In Acts 10:32 he says: "Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He's lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea." So God -- we have God in this portrait literally giving Cornelius street directions to get to Peter. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit in a rooftop vision to Peter is telling him that he's got to go meet with Cornelius.

Now again, all of this begs a very important question, and the question is this: Why is God going to all of this trouble? I mean, why did God send Peter to answer Cornelius's prayer instead of just answering it himself? Well, this goes back to that circuit of prayer that I was speaking about at the beginning. You see, God sent Peter to Cornelius because he wanted a human connection in that circuit. He wanted a human switch. I mean, Acts 10 is God literally pulling Peter and Cornelius together. I mean, he gives Cornelius a Google map and he gives Peter a vision. He wants them

to come together. In verse 19 it says this: *While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them."* And again this is -- here's the Holy Spirit arranging a meeting of two different groups of men. Verse 21 says: *Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?" And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you."* If that doesn't beg the question: Why didn't God just tell Cornelius himself? How impressive would it have been there to hear the booming voice of God come down from heaven: Cornelius, I heard you. Here's what's going to happen. Cornelius is seeking God, God says wonderful prayer, Cornelius, let me get you a human. Isn't that what he said? Let me quote: *"Divinely instruct a holy angel to summon Peter for you."* And again the question is why and again the answer is we're in the middle of a proxy war. We are in the middle of the proxy war and we are the weapons that God has chosen. Statement three says: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." And that's because God stoops to conquer and we are the agency that he stoops through.

Finally, there's the fourth statement: "Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray." Now the whole IDOP statement is an answer to the question of prayer that I raised at the very start of this message, and the question is why should I? I mean, let's -- let's take a look at the big picture. Let's review the bidding with a look towards the state of our church with regard to this issue. Let's look to see if we understand where our heads and our hearts and our hands belong as this place.

Just to review again, to quote IDOP, number one: "We believe that prayer changes things." This is the head part. Our knowledge of who we must be praying for and our understanding of how we must be praying have all changed and grown directly as a result of prayer. Pastor Abedini's ministry and his very life are being held up and empowered by that prayer. So yes, we believe that prayer changes things. We've seen it in our own ministry in this church.

Secondly, "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." Well, we've seen that God gives us this immense privilege of being part of the circuit that connects heaven to earth, and it's a sacred privilege and it is also a sacred responsibility. Thirdly, "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." This is really the heart part. And so like Moses, when we lift up our hands in prayer, the kingdom advances; when we grow

weary, when we grow disillusioned, then the enemy advances. And fourthly, "Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray." And obviously this is the hands and the feet part. And that last sentence really says it all, it says, "The most we can do is also the least we can do." You know, there are two great categories of sins that Christians have to deal with. I'm sure you've all heard these before, they're sins of commission, things that we do that we're not supposed to do, and then there's sins of omission, things that we don't do that we are supposed to do. We evangelicals are very, very big on the former and very small on the latter. We don't curse or steal or lie or cheat or lust that much and when we do, we are certainly aware that we have sinned. But I think that we seldom think that God holds us accountable for things that we simply forgot to do or things that we just don't feel like doing, and prayer is one of those things. *James 4:17* sums up God's opinion of the sins of omission, he says this, he says: *Therefore to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.*

Now God has made it crystally clear what his expectations are concerning those being persecuted for Christ's sake. *Hebrews 13* says: *Remember the prisoners as if chained with them -- those who are mistreated -- since you yourselves are in the body also.* And God's referring to those persecuted for the gospel and he gives a

very simple one word command. He says "remember." Really that's all he says: Remember. I said it before, I said -- I had this awful picture in my mind that I'm standing before God and he's judging my life and he points out some very obvious things, he says to me, I placed you in the wealthiest country on earth. I placed you in the safest country on earth in a place where you'd never have to worry about whether or not you'd get enough food to eat or a roof over your head. I placed you in a place where you'd never have to worry about a knock in the middle of the night that would take you off to prison and make you disappear. But this much I asked of you: Remember the prisoners. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them. And so imagine if God then asked you can you tell me the name of a single prisoner whom you chose to remember? Can you show me that you cared enough to remember even one? I think we're doing okay because our answer would be Saeed Abedini in Iran, Gao Zhisheng in China, the families of Ugur, Necati, and Tillman -- remember them -- in Turkey, the Christians living in Dogo Nahawa, that village south of Jos who were butchered in Nigeria, Maryam Rostampour and Marziyeh Amirizadeh, the two women who were arrested and imprisoned for their faith in Iran who defied the authorities in court by insisting that Jesus, and not Allah, was God. By God's grace and through prayer -- and our prayer was part of that -- these women are now freed, have written a book, *Captive in Iran*. You see, we have talked, we have prayed, we have

remembered all of them on our -- at our Wednesday night corporate prayer meetings. Many of you have remembered these people at home. Now I hope by now we've all heard of the woman named Asia Bibi. She's the 45-year-old Pakistani mother of five who's been sentenced to hang for the crime of claiming Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, and just within the last few days, the supreme court of Pakistan has affirmed the sentence. So as it stands right now, in November of 2014 Asia Bibi is scheduled to be hung for claiming Christ as Savior. Will you remember her as if you are chained up with her? She's just one of thousands who are still part of the persecuted church.

You see, there's good news in this and there's bad news in this. The good news is this: We have organizations now like the Voice of the Martyrs who make it incredibly simple and easy to pray for and to care for our persecuted brothers and sisters and so a lot of the heavy lifting has already been done for us. They also make it incredibly easy to write our persecuted brothers and sisters in whatever language is native to them. You just go on their website, they'll give you the phrases, just put together whatever you want in English, they'll translate it for you, huge encouragement to these folks in prison. You could write one to Asia Bibi. You can also sign petitions demanding their release, and all of that is good news. But the bad news is this. The bad news is we really

have no excuse for refusing to remember our brothers and sisters. As James says: *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.* You might say, well, okay, now he's getting legalistic. Okay, this is no longer grace, this is law. But here's the rub. I'm just doing what James 4 has told me to do. You see, I know for me the good that is necessary is for me to tell you what God's expectation of us is. And if I neglect that, for me it's sin. I don't really think we're talking about -- about grace and law. We're talking about grace and disgrace.

There's one thing I want you to remember about the proclamation that I read this morning at the very, very beginning of this message. It's a call for prayer, not just for persecuted Christians. This is the original part of that statement. It may have just gone right past us as I said it this morning. It said: "We also encourage prayers for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it." You know, for many years I've had to count my name among those who chose to ignore it. Just too much stuff going on. God is saying maybe you need to re-prioritize your stuff. You see, a great many Christians don't have a heart for prayer because they don't really get it. They just wonder why a sovereign God needs the input of puny human beings. They don't realize the incredible privilege and the awesome responsibility that God has laid at our feet. We're

the weapon that God has chosen. We're right in the middle. I understand that now but for many years I didn't and I didn't get it. I get it now head, heart, and hands, I get it. And now is the time for all of us to get it as well. I mean, you and I both know the world is never going to understand the power of prayer for the persecuted church, but my question this morning is also my challenge, and the challenge is do we?

Let me just end by -- by using their prayer, and they say this:
Let us pray: To encourage and empower Christians to fulfill the Great Commission in areas of the world where they are persecuted for their involvement in propagating the gospel of Jesus Christ. To give relief to the families of Christian martyrs in those areas of the world. To equip local Christians to win to Christ those persecutors who are opposed to the gospel in countries where believers are actively persecuted for their Christian witness. To undertake projects of encouragement, helping believers rebuild their lives and Christian witness in countries that have formerly suffered communist oppression. To emphasize the fellowship of all believers by informing the world of atrocities committed against Christians and by remembering their courage and faith.

Father, we just thank you for this reminder, we thank you for this time of prayer. I pray that each and every one of us would leave

here with a resolve to remember just one. If it's just Asia Bibi, if it's Gao Zhisheng, if it's Saeed Abedini, whoever it is, Lord, I just pray that you would give us the ability to remember those who are in chains as if chained with them. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.