



river west church

What Kind of Church (Part 5)

Acts 12

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9.30.2012

Prayer – Mark of a Living Church

The Book of Acts is awesome. Life bursts out on every page. It all starts with Jesus Christ in His resurrection power and presence – Jesus alive, at work, on the move, building His church, and engaging in His global mission. The church is at the center of all of this. And the church is on its knees. The church is praying. This is the mark of the living church – it prays (Acts 1:13-14 & 2:42). The church prays and then it steps out in faith, expecting Christ to work. And He does. The work of Christ leads to controversy and conflict. That's why James was executed and Peter was thrown in jail.

Prayer – Privilege, Joy, Mystery, and Struggle

Acts 12 tells the story of James' martyrdom and Peter's release from prison. But the theme of the chapter is actually prayer. "So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church" (Acts 12:5 ESV). This story is given a prominent place in Acts because it highlights the role of prayer in the life of the church. It's a great story, but it leaves us with lots of questions too. Why did James die and Peter live? What really was the role of prayer in the release of Peter? Did it determine the outcome?

This story highlights the many dimensions of prayer. Prayer is a privilege, joy, mystery, and struggle. At River West, we want to be a church that prays – a church that is alive with prayer. But that doesn't mean we have it all figured out. We are determined to pray and to grow stronger in prayer; even though along the way we will have lots of questions to wrestle with. That's OK.

Some churches specialize in trying to sort out the mechanics of God's Sovereignty and how that might interact with human agency. It's a philosophical debate that has spanned centuries and produced libraries full of books. But our focus is more practical. We want to simply obey Jesus' teaching – to keep asking, seeking, and knocking in prayer.

Some churches teach that God will heal every single person we pray for, if we just have enough faith. Other churches teach that God doesn't do any miraculous works of healing in our present time, so why bother praying for healing. We take a different course. We pray for healing, knowing that God can and does heal in the present age. But we also bow before the sovereign will of God, knowing the outcome is caught up in the wisdom of His perfect providence. That means we pray in faith, with expectancy, but we refuse to be crushed by unbelief if God chooses not to answer our prayers at this time. Someday all things will be known.

Some churches teach that prayer doesn't really change anything except our own hearts. In this view prayer is entirely about building your relationship with God. It's about experiencing God and letting him work on your heart and attitude.

Of course we believe that prayer is about experiencing God and having him change our hearts. But that's not the full truth about prayer. God answers prayer, not just in our hearts, but in our world. That's why Jesus said that His followers would do greater works than He did, then, He told them to ask God for specific things in His name. "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do

the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:12-13). This is a controversial passage. It raises lots of questions. We have to struggle with all that it implies. That’s OK.

The Apostle Paul repeatedly asked for prayer. He asked for prayer that God would empower him to preach and that God would protect him from enemies. He asked for prayer, not because he thought it would change the hearts of those who pray, but because he actually believed God would answer those prayers and increase his ministry because of them.

How does it all work? What is the “exact” relationship between our praying and the accomplishment of God’s purposes? Someday in heaven, God will explain that to us. In the meantime, we want to be a church that prays. This isn’t just an academic, philosophical, theological point of interest. This is the LIFE of the church.

So let’s pray, no matter what. In every situation and circumstance, let’s pray. When we don’t understand what God is doing, or it’s difficult to see His answer, let’s pray. God will work in our hearts as we pray. God will change us and cause us to grow closer to Him. God will also work in our world, increase our ministry, set captives free, and bring people to faith in Christ through the power of the Gospel. That’s the kind of church we want to be a part of!