

Prayer 2015

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Date: 24 January 2015

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[0 : 00] As I mentioned, the last number of weeks, in fact, not just the last number of weeks, but the last number of months, there is an enormous amount of work that has been going on around the place, and it's been a huge encouragement to see people involved in working bees in all sorts of different capacities. Last Saturday, particularly, not yesterday, but the Saturday before, really hot, stinking, humid sort of day, and to see so many people sweating it up, it was just incredible. It was an awful day, but let me tell you that an awful day in the sense, the next Sunday, like last Sunday, came in to church, and some of the guys who had been there the longest in that, well, I use the guys in general term, not referring just to blokes, talking about how sore they were. Someone couldn't bend over properly. My neck couldn't move terribly well from all the shoveling and shaking, and it was just, but let me tell you, I find that work a whole lot easier than ministry. I've got to be honest with you, stick a tool belt on. Yesterday,

I shoveled 30 barrel loads of dirt around the place. I find that almost relaxing, almost as a great alternative to being in the face with people. In fact, I would rather sit on a bobcat so that you can't interrupt me, so that you actually feel like your life is a threat if you want to interrupt me, because it's so much easier, I think, to do physical work than it is, in fact, to do ministry work.

I'm not saying they're completely separated. I'm just saying that once upon a time, as a younger man, partly because it was 20 years ago, I could work 90 hours a week in physical work, hotter than 31 degree heat than we had last week, and I could do it relatively, not that it was easy, but I could get up day after day and do that kind of work, and I would sleep soundly at night. Even though you might have pain all over, the pain eventually would disappear. I think there are few things more exhausting than constant exposure to people, especially when there are difficulties to work through with people, or that you are constantly serving them. I think mothers with little children have to be some of the most tired people that I've ever come across, and also emotionally spent people that I've ever come across, constantly serving little children. Ministry is like that in so many different ways.

It is exhausting. It is like herding cats. It's been said that dogs have masters, cats have slaves, cats, cats. And at the moment in our house, we've got 10 cats. One cat, which is not ours, had nine little kittens. Who would have thought? There is four or five still looking for a home, in case you were wanting a belated Christmas present or something for someone, and they'll be ready in about four or five weeks, so feel free to come and get one. But at the moment, you walk in the back door of our house, and you've got to be careful that you're not treading on a cat somewhere. And they are all at different directions, doing different things, doing their own thing. And we, as a family, a family of five, are consistently serving these 10 cats in our house. It's awful.

But that's what ministry's like. It's like herding cats. And you should try and get 10 cats to go in the same direction. Because cats have slaves, but dogs have masters. And so herding cats, it's like St. Paul's Chatswood is 300 cats, me including as one of them. And we're all wanting to do our own thing, go in different directions. It's like herding cats. And that is exhausting.

[4 : 12] And living in Sydney means, in a significant city, we're surrounded by, you know, immediate neighbours, hundreds of people. You walk down the mall in Chatswood, there's thousands of people.

We are aware of millions more in our city. We are constantly exposed to people. And emotional burnout from overexposure to people is a real issue. It's why so many people in ministry burn out. It's emotional burnout from exposure, overexposure to people. And once upon a time, the news of hostility, faraway land would take months to arrive with us. Nowadays, in the world in which we live, a couple of shots are fired on the other side of the world. And we know about it by the news that night.

We are already tired from exposure to people. Compassion dries up in the face of human need. And worse still is that we seem to be consistently called upon to be compassionate for people in our world. And again and again, we're called upon to be compassionate. And yet when we are compassionate, it seems like no real change is ever affected in our world. We see TV ads of starving children.

And so we give, but the ads just keep appearing. And it's like, well, I've sort of done my bit, but it doesn't seem to have done anything. They're always starving children. The tendency in that overexposure to the needs of people is that we start to harden our hearts little bit by little bit by little bit. It's much easier, I think, for us as a church to gather and theologize about evil and suffering than to actually weep over it or to actually do anything about it.

Our desensitization to human physical and psychological need flows over into their spiritual need. And so we have a core value of things like local and global impact. And we actually wonder, after years and years and years of being a church in this community, is it in fact ever possible, become cynical, whether it's actually even possible to have impact for people's lives.

[6 : 29] The need in our world is enormous. 55 million people die each year. A majority of those, the vast majority of those, without Christ. So many people are lost. So few are saved.

And so we ask ourselves year in, year out, how many times has the gospel been preached? How many leaflets have we dropped into mail boxes? How many doors have been knocked on? How many children have sat through scripture classes? How many mission teams we had? We are told here in this text that the harvest is plentiful. And we wonder whether it actually is. I think as we begin here in verse 35, that Jesus was in danger of overexposure to people too. It says that Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. According to one Jewish historian, there was over 204, or there was 204 cities and villages in Galilee at the time that Jesus was preaching and teaching. And if Jesus were to speak in two locations, remember, he doesn't get a plane and flies. It's like walking from town to town.

If he was to speak at two locations a day, it would take him four months nonstop to get through them all. So apart from the sheer energy needed to keep up with that pace, there is the enormous emotional drain of Jesus teaching, healing, preaching, doing all that, serving so many people. And yet, Jesus' basic response to the vast people that were in front of him and all their needs that he saw was compassion. Verse 36, when he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. It says here that people without Christ are like sheep without a shepherd. They will soon run out of pasture and starve. They will get lost. They will get caught in bushes. They will die. And in the meantime, sheep without a shepherd, are harassed, bullied, bruised, beaten, helpless, exploited. They are adrift, moving as a flock together, barely knowing why or even where they're headed. The unbelievers you know may not seem to fit that description. But do not be misled by the shell of self-assurance. If you see them with the eyes of Christ, you will recognize sheep who desperately need a shepherd behind all the self-assured sinful behaviors, life frustration, exploitation, despair, and hopelessness. And Jesus' response to them is compassion. That is, the word means to be moved in your stomach to have pity. It's a gut-wrenching pity for the lostness of people, their hopeless state. It is to have your stomach turn and your emotions moved in the face of human need. It's the same word used in the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, where the father saw his broken son trudging over the heel after he had run away. And the only emotion that the father feels for his son is compassion. The prodigal son should be better titled the compassionate father, because that in the end is what that parable is all about, the compassion of God. The father represents God in that parable and his compassion towards us. It's God's compassionate towards us. He sees our rebellion.

He sees our sin. He sees our failure. He sees the carnage that is our lives. And he's moved in his gut to do something to have pity on us as sheep without a shepherd. He has a deep-seated feeling of pity that drives into action, an action that in the end that saw his own son take the way of the prodigal, to go on the cross, to die for us, to see the Lord Jesus become the prodigal so that we could be welcomed into his family. And so I've got to be honest with you. I stand here today and I've got to ask myself, do I feel that pity for those people that I know who don't know Jesus?

Is my immediate response as I walk down the mall in Chatswood, pity, compassion for the sheep that are lost, all moving between Westfield and Chatswood Chase like a flock lost, looking for something?

[11 : 34] Or is my immediate feeling get out of my way? Is my immediate feeling racism as I gaze upon people?

Judgmentalism. And so when I look at this text and I think about my heart, that's my need. My need is to feel compassion because of their need. That's my first need. My first need is to feel compassion because of their need. And if we misdiagnose the condition, we in fact won't be pleading for the right solution. Our need is to have the compassion of Jesus. And compassion is a work of his grace in our hearts. It's not the product of my work. It's the product of prayer, of calling God to change my heart. Remember we looked at it last week from Luke 11, that Jesus, sorry, the Father delights to give us what we plead for in prayer. And he calls us at the very end of Luke, of that section we looked at, is to plead for the Holy Spirit to come and to bring reformation in our hearts, renewal in our hearts. And that is the first prayer. Have I become desensitized to the crowd of shepherdless sheep? Have you become desensitized? Around five years ago in this country, less than 16% of the population of this country went to church regularly. 16%. Not calling them all Christian, just talking about people who went to church regularly. If we assume that they are in fact Christian, 16% are Christian, if we make that assumption, a full 84% of this country don't declare any pretense to know Jesus at all. No pretense to know Jesus. And so at 7.48 this morning, the population of our country was 23,722,000 people. 80% of that is just short of 20 million people who are on a Christless journey as a flock, moving nowhere. 20 million people. That's the need. Jesus saw the need as he preached around Galilee.

He saw the crowds. He had compassion on them. He calls us to see the need in front of us. Now, not 20 million people are not all of our need, but 20 million people. Those 20 million people can't know ultimate meaning in life. They cannot know what it is to be purified, to have a clean conscience before the God of this universe. They cannot know the privilege of what it is to be able to call him Father. They have no hope for eternal life. The need is huge.

And our need is to feel compassion because of their need. And so firstly, our need is to pray, I believe, as a church, for that compassion, for that Holy Spirit to come and to renew us with the gospel in such a way that we have that compassion. But notice secondly, when confronted with the enormous needs in front of Jesus, he doesn't see hopelessness in the way that we might have an external, yes, let's get out there, but internally feeling a sense of hopelessness or whether or not it's even possible to have gospel impact. Jesus sees potential, not hopelessness. Verse 37, then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Jesus saw an amazing potential. He says the harvest is plentiful. And so the metaphor changes in the second half here.

[15 : 39] Unbelievers are not only like sheep who are in trouble, but they are like a paddock of wheat ready to be harvested. And so we need the eyes of Christ not only to see the need, but also to see the expectancy and the hopefulness of the harvest which is before us. And so that's the second question. Do I look at my neighbours and my colleagues and my classmates and my friends with a real sense that this person is a potential follower of the Lord Jesus? And I want to put it in my hand and say, not enough. In fact, I want to say yesterday afternoon, spent some time with some people, never even occurred to me that these people here are potential followers of the Lord Jesus.

It has probably been so long since the Lord has used most of us to lead a person from unbelief to faith in the Lord Jesus that we actually even really wonder whether there's any potential left there at all. We still know that there is a terrible lostness in the world. We still feel some compassion when we let ourselves think about it enough. But potential, potential, we wonder, could there ever be a harvest time in my life after so many years of fruitfulness? And the answer to that question, I believe, is a resounding yes. Yes, it is. When Jesus said in Luke 18 that it's hard for the rich people to enter the kingdom, the disciples responded with a, well, who then can be saved? Who can be saved? And Jesus seemed to take away all potential for the harvest for them, but actually what he was doing was actually laying a new basis for the potential for the disciples. He answers, what's impossible with men is actually possible with God. What we're meant to notice is that it's actually God's harvest. He is the Lord of the harvest and it is his harvest field. It is his paddock. It is his crop. It's not ours. It's God's harvest in

Chatswood. It's not St. Paul's Chatswood's harvest. It's his harvest. And so harvest time at St. Paul's in our lives won't come because we've got so many competent communicators. It won't be because we've organised ourselves well. It won't be because we've got better facilities. The harvest that we want to see is in fact impossible for us. New birth is a miracle and so our goal is to see God to do the impossible through a bunch of failures like me, like you.

That's the way it's happened in history and that is how it will happen again. In God's time, he will perform the miracle of harvest and every time it happens, it will be marvellous in our eyes. It will be marvellous to see it. What then should be done? There are many things that can be done by us for the harvest, but considerable effort needs to be poured into the primary step.

[19 : 12] Action is demanded. Jesus calls for action on our behalf. He doesn't call for inaction. He doesn't say, just sit back and let God do it. Verse 38, ask the Lord of the harvest therefore to send out workers into his harvest field. It's what we've seen consistently throughout this series on prayer, that God is sovereign, he's good, he's the father who delights to give us and yet at the same time he calls for us to beg and to plead and to ask him consistently and consistently that his will be done, that his kingdom come, that our needs are met. And so in sync with his compassion for the lost, Jesus calls us to beg God to send out workers into the harvest field. The word here is literally to beg. It is to plead that the Lord of the harvest will cast out workers, begging God to literally throw workers into the harvest field into God's paddock, if you like. And this begging is linked to the compassion. In fact, it comes out of compassion. Prayer is the action that follows the feeling of compassion. It's a strange thing to plead for though, for God to raise up workers. It's strange, because I'm putting my farmer's hat on here for a little bit. It's strange that the farmhands should beg the owner of the farm to send out workers into the owner's harvest field. That's strange, as an agricultural analogy. Because it seems to imply that God doesn't know, one, that there's a shortage of workers in his harvest field. And secondly, that it's almost like the owner of the harvest doesn't care whether or not the harvest is coming in, which is the exact opposite of every farmer that I know. Why then are the farmhands told to beg the farmer to get more help into the farm?

I think something very important is happening here. And there's only one, there is at least one possible answer that might be the only answer. That is that God has willed that his miraculous work of harvesting be preceded by the earnest prayer of his people. It's consistent with what we have seen in the last few weeks about prayer. Before he does a great work. One of the things that God does is he shifts the heart of his people so that they are compassionate. And that he shifts the heart of his people in such a way that they compassionately plead for the work.

To my great shame, I have not been faithful to pleading that prayer. Having said that, I am however convinced that the really great issues before us as a church, namely the harvest, will be settled on our knees.

Not literally, figuratively. Be settled in prayer. That doesn't mean that we don't do anything except pray, but it does mean that we should do nothing without praying.

It is true that God often uses means. It is also true that we as a church, by default, and as by sinful people, by default, we often focus on the means and we forget that the really significant work of what God, the really significant work must be God's work. Otherwise, what we do will come to naught.

[23 : 41] Jesus' compassion issues in prayer and a call for us to pray. It may be that if we fail to pray, it is because our compassion is defective.

Or it may mean that, in fact, we are compassionate people, but they've actually not diagnosed the problem correctly, and that is, we don't clearly understand the desperate plight of the lost.

And if that is the case, what we will do as a church is we will throw all of our energies into the secondary solutions rather than the primary solution.

In fact, we will argue over what are the best secondary solutions, and we will not give ourselves to consistent prayer for the lost.

And so, my friends, we begin a new ministry year. The harvest is still plentiful, I believe. In fact, the needs seem to be endless.

[24 : 52] Just here in the harvest field of Chatswood, let alone the rest of the 20 million people in this country, and let alone the billions of people in our world, and our objective as a church is to see people rescued by the Lord Jesus.

That is why we exist. We are a lifesaver station. We are a mission outpost in this area, in this time, in this place. In the last couple of years, we have taken very significant steps, significant risk, in fact, to upgrade and to fit out our facilities for mission.

That is why we've gone through what we've gone through and continue to go through. It is for mission. Let me emphasise that point again and again and again.

The facilities exist for mission, not for our comfort. I have said that consistently for the last number of years, before we even proceeded with it.

These facilities exist for mission, not for our comfort. And so we must be vigilant consistently that that becomes and continues to be the main thing in front of us as a church.

[26 : 05] We must be careful that we do not treat our time to build program in the same way that we might treat a renovation at home.

And so the renovation at home, namely, is that we put all this effort into upgrading our home and then at the end of it, we crack a bottle of bubbly, we sit back and go, ah, that's awesome.

In the same way, when I built the deck at the back of the rectory, the goal of the deck was to be able to sit on it and enjoy it. And the temptation will be for us to do the same as a church, to celebrate sometime in March and to sit back and go, isn't this for, we don't need to look at it again for another 30 years.

That will be a temptation. This project has in many ways been part of a new beginning, but it also signals a new beginning for us as a church.

And so let's pray for harvest time at St. Paul's. I don't know what God is going to do amongst us and will continue to do amongst us. I don't know if this is a season for significant harvest.

[27 : 22] Maybe not. I know for a fact as your pastor that I personally believe that I'm not broken enough, I'm not dependent enough, I'm not compassionate enough, and therefore I'm not prayerful enough for others.

And so firstly, my prayer is for my heart and my prayer is for our hearts that we might see the compassion which is in front of us.

I read an article once which is very interesting. It said that atheists give to need because they're moved by compassion. Christians give to need because they're motivated by doctrinal or by reputational concerns.

Oh, may that not be true for us. That is, we give because more out of a sense of duty rather than compassion. And I believe that sometimes our praying can be the same.

We pray for global mission, local mission, because we think we know that we ought to doctrinally rather than we're actually pleading with God out of hearts of compassion for those who are lost.

[28 : 33] And so pray that our hearts and our collective heart at St Paul's senses the need, feels the compassion, sees the potential and stays fervent in prayer.

This is what we've been talking about throughout this series and what I talked about from Luke 11 last week. Our Father in heaven delights to hear our prayer, to answer our prayers, and particularly he delights to hear and to answer the prayer that we would call for the Holy Spirit to come and to bring gospel renewal and renovation in our hearts.

That's our first call here, to pray for that. And secondly, pray that we will be a church that has a very real sense of the potential harvest that we are in right now in the middle of and that we will be consistently looking to do whatever it takes to be working in that harvest field.

And so I'd encourage you to be praying for ICS kicking off this week and for the 11 young lives that God has given us already and the families associated with those young lives, the privilege of being able to minister to them and the many more that are going to come in the next couple of years.

Pray too that you as a member of St Paul's will be one of those workers thrown out there into the harvest field so that the lost and the hopeless will find their shepherd. And thirdly, pray, I want to encourage you to pray for those of you know who are outside of Christ.

[30 : 02] At the beginning of last year, I encouraged us as a church to pray one plus one plus one in the hope that under God's sovereignty that it will equal one at the end of the year. I know that's not good mathematics, but that is pray for one person once a day for one minute that they would know Jesus by the end of 2014.

I started well with that, but I didn't finish well with that. And so, by the grace of God, re-engage with it again. I find it really difficult to stay consistently praying prayers that revolve around God's priorities and not mine.

That's my sinful heart. The flesh is weak, but the spirit is willing. Our Father is a compassionate God, and when we ask for a fish, he does not give us a stake.

And so, start this year confident and hopeful to pray God's priorities in prayer, and especially for the harvest that we are placed in as a church.

Now, already, a bit earlier this morning, I told you about the deep needs which are in front of us right now to get part of that mission up and running. And so, as I do every Sunday, I stand down in the front here.

[31 : 19] You're probably wondering why I'm standing down in the front here most Sundays. I'm inviting people to pray. This morning, I want you to come and pray for our mission. Just briefly, feel free to go to morning tea, but for those who want to gather, I'm going to be down in the front here, straight after the service, and I'm going to pray for ICS, and we're going to pray for ICS, we're going to pray for the hoodles that we have right now in our mission, and that we, as a church, would have compassion for those that are lost around us.

Please enjoy me in prayer straight after.