



lyona bible church

LIFE GROUP QUESTIONS – JANUARY 10, 2010

Announcements – Please read these to your group!

Please check your bulletin and the website (www.lyona.org) each week for additional information.

- **Join a Life Group:** Our Life Groups are a place of accountability, belonging, and care. We have made it easy for anyone and any couple to join a Life Group. Sunday January 10 marks the date that our current Life Groups will open to new families for 4 weeks. After the 4 weeks, groups will be “closed” for 5 months.

Marks of a Healthy Church: 7 Prayers, Part 1 (Acts 2:42-47)

Questions

1. What was the most interesting idea or principle about this Sunday’s message?
2. As the speaker talked about his life-changing experience with prayer, what are your experiences with prayer? Has it been a consistent thing in your life? Why or why not?
3. Have someone read Acts 2:42-44. Our relationship with God is to be personal not private. Why do believers have a tendency to keep our relationship with God personal and private? Is this biblical community?
4. Have someone read Acts 2:45-47. Could this be you? Could this be our church? How can we begin to live this out?
5. 7 Pastoral Prayers:
 - We would see that the greatest problem in the universe is not moral failure but failure to glorify God.
 - We would see that we live under mercy and not under God’s wrath.
 - We would recognize that God has purposefully placed us here for His glory.
 - We would wholly abandon ourselves to Christ and the Gospel (not to American Evangelicalism).
 - We would become an equipping body not an inward focused family.
 - We would seek unity under our purpose/mission and not preferences.
 - We would believe in the gifts of the Spirit and desire them earnestly.

Which one of these seven prayers challenges you the most? Which one is most applicable to you?

6. Spend time together to pray through these prayers together. Imagine the impact that our church could have on our community if we would commit to pray these prayers over the next five weeks.
7. Do you, after hearing the sermon this Sunday, need to confess anything or repent of anything? What in your life needs to change?

Prayer Requests

A place to write out your groups’ prayer requests

INTRODUCTION

Growing up in a Catholic home, prayer was something we did at home, in church, and on the baseball field. Whether it was the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, or making the sign of the cross while making my way to the plate, prayer was a part of me. Then one summer morning, I overheard a prayer unlike I have ever heard—even to this day.

I spent the summers with my grandparents in Virginia to earn a little cash by carrying nails for my grandfather. They were churchgoers, who loved Jesus and loved the Bible. They would thoughtfully pray over each meal, always giving God glory. Then one morning around 5:30, as I was getting ready, I overheard my grandmother talking. So curiosity got the best of me and I quietly went to check out what was going on.

As I approached the living room, I heard my grandmother say names of people from our family. So as I peaked my head in, I saw her on her knees praying for our family. It was both humbling and intriguing. I really couldn't understand why anyone would get up at 5am to pray, but the longer I silently stood there reflecting on her words I began to understand her devotion to Christ.

Ever since that morning, I try my hardest to spend at least 30 minutes each morning with God. Prayer is a lifeline to God. It is what gives us hope, faith, and community with our Father.

Prayer is very important to the life of every believer, especially to pastors. As shepherds of the local church, prayer has been a tool to help me care for those under my care. There are at times where I will write out a specific prayer and pray through it over a period of time. Over the last eight years, I have prayed seven specific prayers for the local churches that I served at. These seven prayers have changed the way I teach the Scriptures and pray for the church.

So before I get to the seven prayers, I want to take sometime to unpack a little of the premise passage. This small passage in Acts is the premise of the seven prayers.

There was a time when the Church looked much different than it does today. Luke records a glimpse into the life of the early church. It is a scene that believers today should strive for. It is a picture of what the Church can be and what believers can be. Acts 2:42-47 is that picture of hope, community, sacrifice, and growth.

⁴²And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.¹

This passage takes place during the holiday, Pentecost, which is a Jewish festival that occurs 50 days after Passover in commemoration of harvests. Jews from all over the world would come to this festival, which meant that there were many cultures/nationalities represented. This passage is the result of Peter's sermon and the salvation and baptism of 3,000 people.

This group of over 3,000 (120 prior to Pentecost) devoted² themselves to several things. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.³ These believers studied and

¹ All Scripture referred in this sermon, unless otherwise noted, is taken from: The Holy Bible: English Standard Version. (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

² The word "devoted" means to adhere firmly to something. It was much more than just a routine it was life.

read Scripture together, hung out/did life together, ate together, celebrated Christ together, and prayed together. This is something that we rarely see in American Evangelicalism.

Even through our Life Groups here, we are beginning to do these things. But from the context it seems that there was urgency to do these things. In all honesty, too many of us do not involve ourselves in community because of fear and a bad experience⁴. We've been taught that our spiritual life is to be personal. This is true but we act like it is private, which is unbiblical.

⁴³And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

Now this verse is amazing to me. I respect all the authors and commentaries I read and use, but almost all of them took this passage as this "awe" came upon these believers because of the apostles were doing miracles. It seems that this reverential fear and wonder came on these believers not only because of the miracles but also because of the biblical community that was taking place in verse 42. This unprecedented way of life for these believers was the result of people submitting to God. The miracles done by the apostles definitely can get people talking with both fear and wonder.

⁴⁴And all who believed were together⁵ and had all things in common.⁶ ⁴⁵And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

These verses blow how we "do church" out of the water. We may have seen glimpses of this type of sacrifice. There may be a story or two like this but it rarely happens. Since many of us haven't seen this occur much, we have a hard time grasping the concept of these two verses.

We need to look through the lens first century Christianity, not 2010 American Evangelicalism. These believers are selling off their acquisitions, landed property, possessions and taking the funds and spreading it to those in need. These believers are living in a society where taxes are out of control to support a massive ruthless Roman army and to support a religion that had just plotted the execution of their Founder. Unlike 21st century America, it is not like these people have a lot to begin with. Their attics are not full of stuff that hasn't been touch in 20 years.

This is much different than taking \$200 out of savings to go pay for someone's utility bill. This isn't forsaking a TV for the bathroom and dealing with four already in the house to meet the need of a poor believer with one TV. That's not much sacrifice in the context of this passage. Even though those things are good to do, this is not what is happening in this passage. These believers are not taking out of their wealth and spreading that out to the needy. They are selling what they need, placing on the market something that will affect their comfort, safety, and lifestyle in order to meet the need of others.

³ The early church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, which was the teaching of Jesus including the teachings post-resurrection. These believers would fellowship, which meant that sharing acquisitions, possessions, and material goods. Breaking bread, which included both the Lord's Supper and a larger meal, was also important to their lifestyle. Finally, prayer was vitally important to them and their relationship to each other.

⁴ If that were the reason—a bad experience—for not involving myself in biblical community, I would not go back to the grocery store. I have had a horrible experience in a grocery store, but I find myself going back for whatever reason (deals, coupons, perks, etc.). We all have had bad experiences but it doesn't seem to stop us with other things (restaurants, stores, marriages, relationships, etc.).

⁵ It is very likely that these 3,000⁺ believers were "together" in groups according to languages, nations, or other associations. It would really be hard to do life together with 3,000 people. It seems that small groups was the better venue to do life "together."

⁶ There is some speculation that this community was a form of communism. However it was no way a form of communism because everything was done voluntarily and people still own possessions ("in their homes" verse 45). Communism demands abolition of personal property, acquisitions, and possessions.

⁴⁶And day by day, attending the temple⁷ together and breaking bread in their homes⁸, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

This is the second time that we see the phrase “day by day” and the word “together” in this passage. It reminds us again that daily these believers were doing life together. It shows their commitment to Christ and each other. To attend the temple, these believers would walk and talk together. While at the temple, they may have prayed together and worshipped together. Then afterwards, they would have shared a meal followed by celebrating the Lord’s Supper together. This profound and weighty passage is hard for many of us to grasp and begin to live out. The examples of belonging, community, sacrifice, and joy is foreign to us and our relationship with Christ.

Almost nine years ago, I was placed in my first ministry position. Even though it was a part-time position, I began to learn a lot. I learned a lot about people, ministry, God, and myself. Since then, I have had the privilege to lead several ministries in different parts of the country. In each position, I would catch myself praying the same things over and over again. I also caught myself reading and meditating on this Acts 2 passage. *Could this be us? Could this be our church? Could this be Jenny and I? How can we live this out? What does this look like for us?* I was convinced that one day I would live to see a glimpse of this passage. The reason why I was so convinced and hopeful was because of my friends and family. Most of my family is unchurched and not because they have an issue with God but with the Church (or a church).

I’ve learned over the last eight years of ministry that most unchurched don’t have a problem with God as much as they do with the Church and the church. That is why I’ve prayed fervently that the Church would reflect the community of the early (Acts 2) church. Then one day I was given a link to a Dallas-based church, where they had nine prayers that the pastoral staff prayed consistently⁹. These prayers helped me weigh through the things that I had been praying and actually write them out as prayers.

As we look at these seven prayers, that have been my premise for ministry, may they show us why and what we do what we do here at Lyona.

Prayer #1: We would see that the greatest problem in the universe is not moral failure but failure to glorify God.¹⁰

Most of you know that I am a reader. I spend much of my down time reading books and articles (most of which is related to the spiritual things). I have read some really bad (theologically speaking) books and articles when it comes to Christianity. But another thing that I spend time doing is listening (and watching) other pastors teach. One of the things that have been really frustrating to me is to listen and read about moral failure. I’ve heard this growing up in church. “You can’t do that with your girlfriend. You can’t see that movie. You can’t touch that beer. You’ve can’t say that bad word.” I can remember being told that I couldn’t have a sucker when driving down the road because someone from church would think that it was a cigarette. It was always about the things Christians cannot do. And if Christians avoided those things God would bless them.

When we hear that God hates lying, cheating, stealing, and those who do such things will end up in hell forever, there’s a tendency to believe that this is the problem. And if we stop doing these things that God will bless us. If this was true then all we have to do is stop lying, cheating, and stealing and God will be okay with us. But the

⁷ The early church looked like a reformed sect of Judaism, noting their daily involvement in the temple. All of the first converts were Jews.

⁸ Table fellowship denotes intimacy. Think about your kitchen for a moment. When we have company over, our most intense and intimate conversations take place at the kitchen table.

⁹ The Dallas-based church is The Village Church in Flower Mound, Texas.

¹⁰ See Romans 1:21: *For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.* See also 1 Peter 4:11.

problem with this is that these are just the external affects of the root issue. Even if we stop those things there will be other external things that we will struggle with. The root issue is that we are depraved sinners who fail to glorify God with our entirety because we love ourselves the most. The result of worshipping ourselves is sin and moral failure.

American Evangelicalism is influenced with books that are filled with ways to overcome external sins and moral failure. With the majority of church people trying to right the ship of morality, self-righteous pride begins to boast. This pride is what makes the unchurched have an issue with church. When believers begin to have this pride, they have a tendency to look down on other people because they are not at the same level. We begin to see ourselves as the standard. So when people don't meet our standard we begin to look down on them. The ironic thing is that Jesus, who was sinless and was the standard, embraced those who were sinful. Unfortunately this is not getting to the core issue, which is that we worship ourselves by failing to glorifying God. All of us have been created to worship and we normally worship things that cannot sustain that worship.

Prayer #2: We would see that we live under mercy and not under God's wrath.¹¹

This prayer goes with the first prayer. Along with being told not to do things growing up in church, I was told that God would punish me for the things that I did or didn't do. I can remember a sermon about how AIDS is the punishment for those who practice homosexuality or how infertility can be punishment for pre-marital acts. All of this is unbiblical guilt-driven fear mongering. Even to a point, I heard even as a youth pastor that we were to preach to our students ways to avoid moral failure, yet never hit on the real issue—failing to glorify and honor God.

Many of you are still convinced that we, as believers, live this way—in fear of God's wrath. I've heard this all the time as pastor: "God must be punishing me because I have cancer." "I lost my job, what did I do for God to do this to me?" "My marriage is falling apart why is God angry with me?" With this mindset, there's a tendency to blame God for the things that happen to us because He is angry with us. Whether we admit it or not, this is the default that many Christians go to when bad things happen to them. These are things that draw our attention away from sin and the brokenness of the world caused by sin. Then our attention is defaulted to play the blame game with God.

This does not mean that as Christians we will not experience suffering, hurt, and pain.¹² Nor does this mean that there are physical/emotional consequences to our sins. But to think that God is somehow angry with us is unbiblical. It is like a paralyzing fear of God. Paul, who unprecedentedly suffered more than any other apostle, wrote that God is rich in mercy and gives us mercy in times of distress. God has compassion on His children—those who have been redeemed. Our punishment for our sin was placed on Jesus at the cross.

Prayer #3: We would recognize that God has purposefully placed us here for His glory.¹³

One of the fundamental truths of Christianity is that God is sovereign. God is in total control and has been before He created the universe. He knows, controls, and guides all things for His glory and for our good. Nothing happens by chance.

Everything that happens in our small minute lives happens because God has allowed it to happen so He can receive the glory. This means in times of suffering, pain, and hopelessness. God knew who your neighbors

¹¹ See Luke 15:20: *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.* See also Romans 9 and Ephesians 2.

¹² See Job; John 9:1-7; Romans 5:3; Philippians 3:8; and 1 Thessalonians 3:4.

¹³ See Acts 17:26: *And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,* See also Psalm 104:24; Proverbs 3:19; Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 9-11; Ephesians 1; and 2 Timothy 1:8-12.

were going to be, how many jobs you would have, the person you would marry, how many kids you would have, and what house you would grow up in. All so He could place us in those places for His glory and for our good. Once we begin to see the truth of God's sovereignty, everything in life will look differently—God and the Gospel becomes the central point of our lives.

Prayer #4: We would wholly abandon ourselves to Christ and the Gospel (not to American Evangelicalism).¹⁴

The older I get I begin to see how self-centered I am. Paul writes about how people worship themselves instead of the Creator. We live in an age where consumerism is a lifestyle for almost every American. Keeping up with the Jones' is not just an overstated saying but also a way of life for Americans, including American Evangelicals. The Church has been influenced heavily by consumerism. Everything revolves around me. My spouse, my kids, my church, my God, my sports, my job, my hobbies, and everything else revolve around me—the center of my life. Everything we do is to benefit us, including God.

One of the teachings going around American Evangelicalism is the prosperity gospel. Whenever there is a word in front of gospel, it no longer is the true biblical gospel. The prosperity gospel says that God wants everyone to be wealthy and healthy, where there is no pain, suffering, or poverty. The basic premise of the prosperity gospel is that we follow Christ so He can make our life better. He can bless us. He can make us rich. That with a little faith, our debt and cancer is gone because God's favor of us is seen through prosperity. This is unbiblical because all of Jesus' apostles suffered through persecution, bad health, and poverty. All but one was murdered. They followed Jesus because He was better...He was life. They didn't wholly abandon their lives to Jesus so He could make their lives better. If anything their lives got worse, in the prosperity perspective.

May we make Christ and the Gospel the center of our lives? Everything we do must be seen through the lens of Christ. Everything revolves around Christ. How we treat our spouse, kids, jobs, and finances must be centered on Christ. Not because He will make our lives better but because He is better. He is our life. May we totally abandon ourselves to Christ.

Prayer #5: We would become an equipping body not an inward focused family.¹⁵

In 1970, Bill Gaither wrote a song entitled *Family of God*. I sang this song throughout my adolescence, as a student in Bible College, and as a pastor in a small town church. Since I am a reader, I tend to listen and read songs before I sing them because I want to make sure that I believe the things I'm singing. I understand the context and purpose of the song and I also understand the perspective of the songwriter. But there is no Scriptural support to suggest that a local church is a family.

Paul writes in Ephesians that the church is a body. A family is not a body...they are very different. A family is a group of people affiliated by blood, affinity, or co-residence. A body is made up of biological systems that work together in order to sustain and produce life.

¹⁴ See 2 Timothy 3:1-5: *But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ²For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.* See also John 10 and Romans 8.

¹⁵ See Ephesians 4:11-16: *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

From the many years of attending church, I saw that when a church begins to see themselves as a family, growth becomes hopeless. A local church, that sees themselves as a family, becomes a place filled with inward-focused people that are affiliated with affinity. When this happens, it is very hard for new people to feel accepted. Perhaps the biggest reason is because this kind of church is content with the affinity they have with each other.

Conflict is one of the definitions of a dysfunctional family. All churches have conflict. Family churches are characterized by rejection of outsiders and usually running from conflict. Body churches are characterized by acceptance of outsiders and usually confronting conflict.

Christ is the head and the church is the body. Christ gave to the church leaders who are to equip the body for the work of the ministry. Then as the body begins to be equipped for ministry, they will then become the leaders who reciprocate the equipping. Christians, who make up a body, have been given different spiritual gifts and talents in order to equip each other for the work of ministry. These gifts are like the systems of a body, which work together to sustain and produce life.

Prayer #6: We would seek unity under our purpose/mission and not preferences.¹⁶

Along the lines of the fifth prayer, we as a body would seek unity under our mission not preferences. From Bible versions, music, dress, and opinions on how to, everyone has preferences. Everyone has a right to those preferences, but problems can come when these preferences are pushed on everyone. The fact is no one will agree on everything but that doesn't mean everyone cannot agree on anything. Christ placed men, in the office of elders, to lead this local church with a mission. We must be willing to agree on the mission of this local church because if we don't there will never be unity.

Our mission is to develop revolutionary disciples of Jesus Christ. We do this by involving all who come into a three continuous steps. Our first step is help people see that their greatest need is still the greatest gift—Jesus Christ, which is evangelism. Then our next step is help people see life from God's perspective, which is discipleship. And our third step is to help people live out the Gospel every day, which is missional living. Each of our ministries uses this strategy in order to accomplish our mission.

Prayer #7: We would believe in the gifts of the Spirit and desire them earnestly.¹⁷

It is important to recognize that the Spirit still moves powerfully today. Whether we fail to recognize or believe in the miraculous gifts of the Spirit does not mean they cease to exist. As a pastor, I cling to the faith that God the Spirit moves powerfully in spite of us. I need Him to move in spite of me.

This prayer goes along with prayer five in the sense that as a body the Spirit has given us gifts for our common good.¹⁸ I am desperate to believe that healing, words of knowledge, faith, prayer, teaching, mercy, giving, and many more can still take place in churches here and around the world. The Spirit is strategic and intentional as

¹⁶ See Ephesians 4:1-7: *I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.*

¹⁷ See 1 Corinthians 14:1: *Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.* We must desire the gifts of the Spirit for His glory and not for our own selfish desires.

¹⁸ See 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.

He apportions gifts to people. The Spirit gives us gifts so that we may build up and equip the body, not ourselves. We are called to desire those gifts for our common good.¹⁹

These are the seven prayers that have been spoken with love, faith, and hope. I believe that these prayers can change the way we “do church” and how we live as believers.

Imagine the impact that our church could have on our community if we would commit to pray these prayers over the next five weeks, which is the length of this sermon series. What would happen if we began to live a lifestyle like the early believers in Acts 2? Sacrifice, love, hope, community, belonging, and care would be the things characterizing this local church. What impact would these characteristics have on us as believers and on the unchurched in our community?

¹⁹ This is not a promotion or approval of Charismatic and Pentecostal circles that abuse the doctrine, gifts, and works of the Spirit. The Triune God is to be exalted and glorified.

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