

Missional Prayer
Prayer for the Unchurched
Matthew 9:35-38

1. Passion.

2. Prayer.

3. Praxis.



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01/23/22
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Missional Prayer

Part 3: Praying for the Unchurched

There was a news story that came out last September about a man by the name of Beyhan Mutlu. Mutlu went missing when he wandered away drunk from his friends.

It seems that Mutlu, who is 50 years old, went out drinking with his buddies, and as they were walking home, he wandered away into the forest. Mutlu found an old building, and being tired, went in, laid down, and fell asleep. But he awoke to the sound of voices. He heard lots of people talking and shouting, and he went out to find out what was going on.

The article states, "With search efforts underway, Mutlu ended up joining a group of volunteers who were helping authorities look for him, the outlet reported.

But when the volunteers began shouting his name, Mutlu became confused and asked whom they were trying to locate..." they answered, "Mutlu." Mutlu said, "I am here. . . Once police learned the man joined his own search party, they gave him a ride home."¹ The article was called, "Turkish Man Joins His Own Search Party." Mutlu was never lost! But in his drunken condition, he was only seeking himself!

In another article, Mutlu said, "I am a construction worker in Inegöl. I came to Çayyaka to work in construction. I had a few drinks with some friends. I left them around 2 a.m. at night. We were staying at a friends' villa in an area close to the construction site. I went to one of the villas and slept," Mutlu explained.

"When one of my friends couldn't find me, he reported me as missing to the (police). There really was no need for that.

"I had changed my phone. That's why the (police) could not reach me when they called. I woke up at around 5 a.m. I thought there was an accident on the road. I saw the search party looking for a missing person. I also took part in the search.

"Then they called my name, 'Mutlu'. I said, 'Oh, that's me.'"²

That story reminds me a lot of what we are talking about today. You see, God is out searching for lost people. He spared no expense and no resources to find his lost children. Now, here's the thing: many Christians are so focused on themselves that the extent of their search is only for *themselves*. Meanwhile, God wants us to sober up and start helping him in the search for truly lost and hurting people.

Today, we want to talk about how to pray for unchurched people. You can call them lost people, or missing people, non-Christians, the unsaved...but the bottom line is that God has many, many lost and missing children, and today we are going to talk about how to pray that they will be found.

¹ <https://nypost.com/2021/09/29/turkish-man-beyhan-mutlu-joins-his-own-search-party/>

² <https://www.dailysabah.com/life/soft-news/its-all-like-a-joke-turkish-man-who-searched-for-himself>

We are in our third of a four-part series on “Missional Prayer.” Missional prayer is more than simply praying for our needs or the needs of others. *Missional prayer is praying for the advancement of the Kingdom of God in our lives, our church, our community, and our world.*

We first learned how to pray for our church from Ephesians chapter one, and I hope you are practicing praying that way: for us to know personally and intimately the person of Christ, for us to live in the promises of Christ, for us to experience and display the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit, and that in all things we would maintain the primacy of Christ.

Then last week we learned that we are to pray for others, and we learned that from Nehemiah’s prayer in chapter one. We do that by praying to be a person of integrity, being willing to make the investment in time by prayer and fasting, in order to intercede for a person. That means that we identify with them, associate with them, have compassion for them. The implication is God’s mission be done – not just needs met, but God’s best for them, and for our church.

We’ve been saying that we are in this series on missional prayer because God is calling our church to greater effectiveness in the Kingdom of God, and that means he is calling us to a *deeper* culture of prayer. Now, don’t get me wrong – we do an excellent job of praying for each other’s needs. When there are health issues, personal crises, or deep needs, we as a church are very, very good at praying for each other when we ask the church to do so. You are a wonderfully praying church. But there is much, much more to prayer than *just* praying for our needs. And for sure – 100% certain – that means we *must* be praying for the unchurched.

One author writes, “There is no more urgent concern in heaven today than for the church to complete its task of world evangelization. God wants a full house for the wedding supper of his Son to His bride, the church (Matthew 22:1-10; Luke 14:16-23). Christ’s return will be delayed until all people everywhere have heard the Good News, but the inadequacy of our witness and harvesting can delay his coming (Matthew 24:14).

The task of world evangelization is primarily dependent on witness and prayer. Prayer must prepare the way for evangelization. Prayer must saturate and cover the work of evangelization. Prayer must follow up and conserve the fruit of evangelization. Only as the church prays will there be sufficient harvesters giving themselves to world evangelization and world harvest (Matthew 9:38).”³

That’s good! I’d read it again but it’s too long. Go download the manuscript and read it for yourself. But in fact, praying about the harvest was *exactly* what Jesus told us to prioritize, what to pray for, and what to do. I’d like for us to look at Jesus’ own words as they are recorded in Matthew’s Gospel, in chapter nine. It’s become our custom to stand when God’s Word is read, so would you stand with me? We do that to show that God’s Word deserves honor, and to change our posture in order to make sure we are hearing it clearly. So listen to what we are told about Jesus:

“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

³ Wesley L. Duewel, *Touch the World Through Prayer* (1986, Francis Asbury Press, Grand Rapids, MI) 186

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matthew 9:35-38, niv)

Would you read that last statement of Jesus with me? (starting with "the harvest") "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Thank you – please be seated. Before we jump into what Jesus is telling us about prayer, let's make sure we understand what is happening when he tells us this.

In this chapter, we see Jesus doing some amazing things – I'd encourage you to go back and read it. But in a rapid sort of a montage of miracles we see Jesus forgiving people, healing people, calling people to follow him, teaching people, raising people from the dead, healing more people (paralyzed, blind, deaf, mute, sick, and the demon possessed). Matthew's words are like a red carpet that welcomes the King; there's no question in anyone's minds that Jesus is God's Son, the Messiah, the King of kings. Matthew's also making sure we understand that Jesus truly came to seek us out, to find us, to forgive us, to heal us, to change our lives and to give us new life as his followers. That's *very* important to remember when we think about what comes next in that passage we just read, as well as what comes right after that passage – as we'll see.

So we're wanting to figure out how to pray for the unchurched, and boy do we learn a thing or two. I hope you are ready to hear this, because once you've heard it you can't go back; if you don't change your life in whatever way God is telling you to, then you will be left without excuse. So if you don't want to pray for unchurched people to be introduced to Jesus, you might want to leave now. Go ahead; we'll wait.

Okay, the first thing we realize about praying for the unchurched is that it takes...

1. *Passion.*

It's a very interesting explanation of Jesus that Matthew gives us. You might be tempted to read that and think that Matthew is telling us what was happening at that particular point in time – at that moment. But it's more than that – Matthew is telling us that this is *always* what Jesus did – *he spent all his time* going through all the towns and villages, teaching in the synagogues, telling people the Good News of God's love for them and healing them. And for every sick person he saw, for every person who he told the Gospel to, for every time he looked out over the crowds that were gathered, he had compassion on them. The word compassion means to be deeply moved, clear down into your bowels. That's what it literally means! Let me ask you this: have you ever been so concerned for someone that you lost your appetite – you just couldn't even eat? Maybe your spouse is in surgery, or maybe he or she hasn't responded to your calls, and you don't know if they are okay or not...if it's serious, the last thing you want to do is go eat something; you'll go without eating until you know he or she is alright. That's what compassion is, and Jesus felt that way for every individual that he met and knew, and for entire crowds of people he didn't know, who were all lost without God. These were "sheep without a shepherd" – these were

people who *could* be God's children, but no one was helping them come to God. So Jesus was moved with passion for them.

If you are going to pray for unchurched people appropriately, you must be filled with passion for them. When you lock eyes with someone and you *know* they don't know Jesus, do you lose your appetite? Are you moved with an ache in your belly for them to know Jesus? If not, then you don't have passion like Jesus, so your prayer is going to be ineffective.

How do you get passion? You pray for it! You pray that God will give you Jesus' passion for the lost, and you don't stop until you get it. Another way to get it is to start praying – regularly – for unchurched people you know, who don't know Jesus. I promise you – if you start really praying for them on a regular basis, God will begin to infuse you with passion for that person, and that passion will quickly spread to others that you know; you'll begin praying for them, too. And soon you'll be praying for crowds – people you don't know.

It takes passion to pray for the unchurched, and if you don't have passion, pray until you get passion. Then, the next natural step in your prayer is the instruction Jesus gives us: to actually spend time in...

2. Prayer.

Obviously! But what's interesting is, after Jesus is moved with passion, he turns to his disciples and he says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

It's not just that we should pray; Jesus tells us *specifically* what to pray for. So let's take that apart just a little bit. Look at it in verses 37 and 38. Got it? What does Jesus tell us about the harvest? It is plentiful. It is ripe. It is low hanging fruit. It's ready for the picking. You don't have to pray for the seed to germinate. You don't have to pray for the plant to grow. You don't have to pray for the soil, or the rain, or against pests, or drought. You don't have to pray about any of that. God took care of it – God himself has made sure that the harvest is ready. It's ready! So what's really needed are workers. What do the workers do? They go out into the field, into the orchard, and they pick. They harvest. They gather. They bring it in.

Jesus tells us to pray to God that he would send workers out into the field.

Do I need to spell this out for us? Okay I will, just in case: the harvest is lost people. Unchurched people. Missing people. They are ready to be "harvested" – they are ready. All we need to pray for is workers – Christians – who will go into the field or the orchard, gather them – become friends with them – and bring them into the Church (capital "C") – the people of God, the children of God. It doesn't mean to a building, but let me tell you, this place is as good as any barn I know. This is a great place for them to be brought to! And it's only getting better! So we need to pray for passion, and we need to pray that people from our church would go out into our community – a community that is ripe for harvest – and become their friends and invite them to church – to be a part of this group, to even come with them to church. That's what we need to pray for.

Where do we go? Wherever people are discouraged, downcast, harassed, and helpless. Does that sound like anyone you know? It sounds like EVERYONE I know! We are all sick and tired of being sick and tired. We've come through two years of a global pandemic, and we're not done yet. Sounds like the harvest is ripe.

You might say that this is a terrible time in our country. After all, we are more severely divided than any time other than the civil war. Lawlessness is the rule; rioting and looting is an acceptable form of protest. Our media – televised and socialized media – are constantly feeding us lies, telling us that sinful behavior is a right and in fact our duty. Opinions are flying. People don't want to hear your opinion; they want to hear their own opinion coming out of your mouth. The economy is tanking, and inflation is flying. Russia is invading. China is burgeoning. False Christians are accusing and judging and insurrecting and conspiratizing. Real Christians are being blamed. So you might say this is the worst time in the world; the harvest has never been more bleak.

I guess it's all in the way you look at it. It's like the two shoe salesmen who were sent to the poorest parts of India where no one wears shoes. One shoe salesman calls headquarters and says, "It's no use. Bring me home. We won't be able to sell a single pair; no one wears shoes. The market is dead." The other salesman calls headquarters and says, "Send all the salespeople and all the shoes you've got. No one here wears shoes! The market is ripe!"

If you pray for and with passion, you will see that the harvest is ripe. Plead with the Father to send workers and resources!

Now, there is something very, very clear in the text that we looked at today, that is the third part of our prayer for unchurched people. Who did Jesus tell this to? *His disciples*. That's very interesting. Because what became the primary job of the disciples to do; when you read all the rest of the New Testament, when you read about them in Church history, and in fact, the very reason you are here today, is why? Because the disciples became the workers in the harvest. And that's the third thing...

3. *Praxis*.

That word means to practice; distinctly different than theory, it means to apply knowledge or skill. Got that? Okay now watch this: Jesus tells his disciples to pray to God to send people out into the world from the Church, to bring those unchurched people into church. Right? Got it.

Let me ask you: when Matthew wrote his Gospel, did he divide it up into verses and chapters? No, he didn't. A Jewish Rabbi did that to the Old Testament in the mid 1400s, and a Bible translator added them in the New Testament in the middle 1500s. So when Matthew wrote his Gospel, there was no chapter nine or chapter ten. So the first verse of chapter ten immediately followed the end of chapter nine. He didn't even take a breath. So let me read those verses to you again, but let me add chapter ten, verse one this time:

"Then (Jesus) said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."
Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness." (Matthew 9:37-10:1, niv)

Can I read that again? *(repeat)*

Jesus told them to pray for workers, *and then sent them out as workers*. IMMEDIATELY after praying for it, they were sent out to put it into practice. No more theory. No more discussion. Go do it.

This is how we pray for the unchurched: we pray for the same compassion for them that Jesus has. We pray for God to send out people from our church to invite people in. And THEN WE GO OUT AND DO IT.

I tell this story in our Membership 101 Core Class, but let me repeat it. When our kids were little, Shelly and I would take them camping. We'd load up our tent and all our gear into our minivan and off we'd go. So imagine that, on one of those trips, I take the boys out for a hike and Shelly decides to stay at camp and relax. And after an hour or so, I come back without our children. What would Shelly say? "WHERE ARE THE BOYS?!" It wouldn't be a question, as much as a demand. What do you suppose would happen if I said, "Well, funny thing, we were going through some heavy brush, and when I came out the other side, I lost them." But then imagine if I said, "It's okay honey. Let's sit here at camp, and we'll pray about it, and we'll ask God to send some people to go find them." Do you think that would be acceptable to her? NO! She would say, "You can pray all you want WHILE YOU SEARCH. And don't come back to camp until you bring them with you."

How *dare* we think our Father God is any different! Do you think God is okay with us sitting in here, asking him to send someone else to look for his lost children? God is saying, "Yes – pray for workers and get out and work. And you'd better bring back my lost children with you!"

When Jesus tells them to ask God to send workers, he doesn't even wait for them to say "amen." He sends them right out.

If the apples are ripe, it will take workers to bring them in. Without workers the crop cannot be reaped. Without you and I going, the unchurched folks we pray for won't come to church. They won't come to faith in Christ.

I remember reading a news story about a wedding party in Australia, who was unexpectedly called into action right after the wedding ceremony. While they were posing for pictures on a scenic ledge, a woman unrelated to the wedding fell into the water and started drowning. Dressed in his tuxedo, the best man jumped in and brought the woman back toward shore. Then the bride, a trained nurse, waded into the water and started administering CPR. By the time the Surf Life Saving volunteers had arrived, the woman had regained consciousness. But according to one safety official, "[The victim] was very lucky that the bridal party was there, and they acted quickly and got her to the shallows." After the daring rescue operation, the drenched but heroic best man and the bride happily rejoined the wedding reception and continued with the festivities.⁴

In some ways, this story serves as a great image for the calling of every local church: we're dressed up for a party (celebrating worship), but at the same time we're also prepared to dive into mission, even when it's inconvenient and dangerous. We should never feel like we can't dirty ourselves or jump in the water to save drowning people. We come here to pray

⁴ *Best man jumps off Glenelg Jetty to save woman*, News.com.au (11-29-10)

together so we can LEAVE here to go invite people in.

My friends, *that is how we pray for the unchurched.* What we've gotten today is not an example of prayer from a sermon, or a saint, or even from Nehemiah or Paul. That is a command of prayer from Jesus himself.

I told you that you couldn't leave here without doing what you've learned. You and I are now without excuse. We will either obey what we've learned, or not.

Let's pray:

Ask God to give you his passion for the unchurched; that you would lose your appetite over how harassed and downcast they are.

Now think of one person you know, that doesn't know Jesus. Pray specifically that they will hear the Good News, that they will be invited to church and introduced to Jesus.

Now tell Jesus that you will leave this place and look for your very first opportunity; you will pray as you go. Thank God for making the harvest ripe. Now, go work.

Amen.

Stand and sing