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“Methodology: Pray for the Entire World”

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We are in a new church life series called “Praxis,” and we just started last week. We are going to be talking about each one of the practices that we’re encouraging everyone to take on. You don’t have to take on all of these on at the same time. We are going to be walking through them together so that they won’t be burdensome.

The reason we are doing this praxis is because praxis is a theological

term for “practices.” We believe that five practices that we encounter this year will transform your faith, your living.

The first praxis we’re going to talk about is: Pray for the entire world, but I want to walk through all five with you first:

P is for Pray for the entire world.

R is for read through the entire word of God.

A is for adding to the community.

X or Chi is representational of Christ.

I is representational of investing in the Kingdom.

S is send yourself to the nations.

Each one of these practices will actually have a tool that we hope will be beneficial and will help undergird each one of these practices. Today we’re talking about prayer. A “Pray for the Entire World “ prayer guide is available to us in the Loft. We won’t actually be focusing on this until later in October, but if you want to get ahead, you can purchase one there. This particular prayer guide will take you through the entire world and help you pray for each country in thirty five days. It’s an incredible opportunity for us.

I am excited that we’re in the Gospel of Matthew. At the end of Matthew (verse 28), Jesus sends his disciples in what is called the “Great Commission.” The disciples are all gathered around on the top of the mountain and Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth have been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them everything that I have commanded you and remember I am with you always.” So, the Gospel of Matthew is kind of leading up to that climax or mountain top experience of Jesus sending his disciples out.

To give you context of chapter 56 in Isaiah, you need to know a little bit about the other chapters in this book. In the first 39 chapters or so in Isaiah, God is actually working with his people, the people of Israel, and telling them about this covenant that he is making with

them. He is calling them to be his people and they are to follow this covenant. They are to be faithful to this covenant. They are to be obedient to this covenant. If they are not, destruction will follow. In the midst of this time of Isaiah, destruction does follow because the people are not faithful or obedient to the covenant; consequently, they find themselves in exile. They find themselves in Babylon, another country, where they are foreigners. They are lost and they are longing to come home. During this time of exile, Isaiah chapters 40-55 were written. When you read these chapters, you realize that God is no longer saying, "These are the rules you should follow to be my people, my covenant people." What he is now saying is "Don't forget that I love you. Don't forget that my grace is here for you. I will make my righteousness your righteousness. Your salvation does not depend on anything that you do. Your salvation only depends on me. You're my people."

Now you may want to end at Isaiah 55 if you're a good writer because it is this beautiful chapter about God's word, which won't return to Him empty, which is full of beautiful words and expressions. But Isaiah doesn't stop there because it's important for us to realize that yes, we are God's people and God calls us to follow His commandments, and yes, God is the God of grace and salvation who draws people to Himself. There is nothing we can do to earn his grace, but here, starting in Chapter 56, we begin to see that God desires us to live out his promises in our daily lives because it is through our behavior that we express our most important relationships.

Isaiah 56:3-20

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
'The LORD will surely separate me from his people';
and do not let the eunuch say,
'I am just a dry tree.'
For thus says the LORD:*

*To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.*

*And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.
Thus says the Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.*

In the New Testament we turn to the Gospel of Matthew which is the first Gospel in the New Testament. Leading up to this point in Matthew, in Chapters five through seven, Jesus has given the famous Sermon on the Mount where he teaches authoritatively about law. Upon hearing him, people realize that he is not just a scribe, he is something more. To the reader today, we know that this Jesus is the Messiah. He is the one that has come to take away the sins of the world. In Chapters eight and nine, we realize that Jesus is also not only an authoritative teacher and preacher, but he is also a healer. He is a healing Messiah. He knows the needs of his people.

We also find, in this Scripture that we're going to be reading today, that Jesus knows God's salvation plan. God's salvation plan was to go to the Jews first to make a people, to make lights to the nations, to make this people, His people. Through his people all the world will come to know him and love him. That has been his plan all along, but Jesus is seeing that the plan is breaking down. The leaders of this time are not doing what they have been called to do.

So, Jesus raises up new leaders, the disciples. The disciples are followers of Jesus Christ, but here in the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew is very clear that when Jesus names these disciples, Matthew calls them apostles. The root verb of apostle is *apostello* which means, "Send, I send." An apostle is one who is sent forth, sent forth with a message. We realize that as these disciples are named that they are also being sent out. They're apostles to go out into the world to bring healing and wholeness to God's people. Listen for his Word:

Matthew 9:35-10:4

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

As I was sharing earlier, we are in a new sermon series called "Methodology," and we're going through the five practices that we believe will transform our living, transform our faith.

The first is prayer. To be perfectly honest, prayer is not really easy to preach on. When I was in college, I was in a Christian group and sometimes we'd go out to eat. Prayer was always a "thing," an issue for us. We came up with this little game where we'd be sitting around a table, and one person would take their finger and put it on their nose. Everyone else would then put their finger on their nose until it went around and the last person to put their finger on their nose had to pray for dinner.

Did you ever play those kinds of games before? I've heard it said—I know Jim Wood has said it, but it's not his phrase—that if you want to know how to pray, you only need to know two different phrases: one is "please," and the other phrase is "thank-you." The kind of prayer that we are being challenged to enter into is not a "please" and "thank-you" kind of prayer. It's not a prayer that you put your finger on your nose and hope you don't have to pray.

This kind of prayer is a commissioning prayer, a prayer that disciples pray when they know they have been commissioned to go into all the world. This kind of prayer is praying for the places where God wants us to go and where God wants to be known. And, God wants to be known everywhere. So, how do we do go and make him known? We pray. When we pray we talk to the One who knows the needs of the world. When we pray we talk to the One who is ultimately ruler of all nations. When we pray we turn on the lights so that we can see. God turns on the lights so that we can see the needs of the world. That's the kind of prayer that we're being invited into. It is praying into the places we're already sent, where God already has commissioned us.

The people of Israel get such a bad rap because they want to be faithful and they just can't do it. They just can't seem to understand that when God gave them all that he did, he didn't want them to just take it and then shut out the world. What God intended when he

created his people was for them to be a light to the nations, for them to be the gatherers of the nations of all peoples.

Following the exile, the people of Israel were really trampled on. They were traumatized. They coped by doing two different things. They either synchronized with the surrounding world or they isolated themselves. What I mean by “synchronized” is that they accepted the pagan religion at hand in Babylon. They just kind of got comfortable with that. Or else they isolated themselves from the world around them and clung to their birthrights. They clung to the fact that they were born into the people of God.

As they are returning back to Jerusalem, to the temple that was being rebuilt, returning to be the people of God, people of prayer, they are a little confused. God wants to set them straight. Usually when God wants to set somebody straight in the Old Testament he sends a prophet. So, through Isaiah he begins to say, “Now look, the foreigner who holds fast to my covenant, that person is mine. The eunuch, the one who cannot even have children but who holds fast to my covenant, I claim him as mine. I’m gathering to myself those who are exhibiting the promises that I have given to you.” Being a part of the people of God is not about a birthright. It’s not about being born into the right country, it’s not about citizenship. What God is saying is, “You are my people if you hold fast to my covenant and you live it.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the book *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and professor who was arrested and assassinated by the Nazis because he was involved in a failed plan to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was an amazing writer and his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, though not an easy read, is a very important read for every believer. What he talks about in it is something called “cheap grace.” You have probably heard this term before. Basically, when Bonhoeffer talks about cheap grace, he is talking about understanding grace as a promise of an eternity of bliss,

with no cost and no expectation of a changed life. That's how he describes cheap grace. So often the believer wants to cling to something called cheap grace, a grace that is found in Jesus Christ where we receive salvation but there's no cost and there's no expectation of a changed life.

What Bonhoeffer says is that there *is* a cost. There is a cost to discipleship and that cost is obedience. It is obedience to all God commands because that is the only evidence that we can show of who we belong to, of who we are and whose we are. He says this, "It is not the proof of your pedigree that counts; it is your life of glad obedience to [God] that demonstrates your real pedigree."

Our birthright does not determine our salvation. The way we live our lives does not determine our salvation. What determines our salvation is God's grace and mercy found in Jesus Christ on the cross and the empty tomb. It is very clear to all of us that there is a huge "however" because our faithful response to God is the evidence that we are his people.

This week I had the most amazing visitor come to see me. We learned that one of our older members, Jean Farrow, died last week. Her friend Shirley called me on the phone and said, "I need to talk to you right away; I have some things I need to show you." I said, "Sure, come on over." We set a time and she came over. She came in. Jean was 84 years old and she had never married and had no children. She has two older sisters in Staunton, Virginia. Shirley has been the one to take care of things for Jean for a while.

We talked about how Jean had been the soprano soloist in our worship services for over 20 years, how she had served in Norfolk Public Schools for over 40 years. Shirley showed me a wonderful article that had been written at Jean's retirement. She told me about times when she and Jean had been roommates at camp and at college.

It was a wonderful visit. She kept giving me these pictures and articles.

Then she said, "I have one other thing I'd like to show you." She reached down into her bag and pulled out cards stacked about an inch and a half thick. "I just wanted to come here and thank you. All these cards are from members of your congregation. I don't even know who they are. I'm not sure if Jean even knew who they were." Those cards were cards from Susie Folk, Betsy Ellis and Debbie Major, Jean's deacons. Jean had treasured and saved that pile of cards until her death. They were so important to her because they were evidence that her people had not forgotten her, that we remembered her and that we loved her. I was so proud to be a part of this body that day.

Jesus understands the needs of his people, whether they are in a nursing home or an orphanage. When he was walking the earth, he saw that the leaders were not fulfilling their responsibilities to guide and protect his people. He saw that not only were his people falling to sickness, but they were spiritually lost. They were helpless and harassed like "sheep without a shepherd." They were living in a time where there was suffering under the oppression of the occupying Roman forces; it was not an easy time to live in when Jesus was there.

So Jesus sends out his disciples. He sends his disciples out this time to bring healing. He doesn't talk about teaching. That comes later. He sends them out to heal the deepest needs of his people, to bring them healing and wholeness and the message of the Gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ is here, the Messiah is here.

Frederick Buechner is still alive at eighty-five years old. Buechner is a wonderful writer and pastor and theologian. He is actually an ordained Presbyterian minister. He talks about calling, about God's call on our lives. He has this famous quote that so many have used and we probably used it in sermons before, but I want to share with

you because I think I may have misinterpreted it for years. He says, "Your calling in life is where your greatest passion meets the world's greatest need." "Your calling in life is where your greatest passion meets the world's greatest need." I have always interpreted it to mean that I was to find out how God had gifted me, to figure out who I am in Jesus Christ and what passion I have inside me, and then take it out into a world that needs it so desperately. That's all wrong. How self-centered that is! I totally misinterpreted that phrase. These Scriptures today have helped me realize that. Understanding our calling is understanding the world's greatest need first, what the world needs. To get close enough to understand where the needs are and then bring passion into it, bring the healing touch of Jesus Christ into it.

I truly believe this lights the path for mission. I believe that when God sends us out, he expects us to continue to talk to him because he is the one that knows the needs of his people. He knows the needs of his people way better than we could ever interpret them. He sends us out to bring that healing. I think the only way we can know how to bring that healing is through prayer.

This summer I did something for myself that felt like the best thing I have done for myself for a really long time. I went to a Catholic retreat center out in North Carolina in the middle of nowhere. There weren't even any cows there. I went to a retreat workshop that was led by a monk who is part of a community in California, but he's actually kind of "on loan" and lives in Augusta, Georgia. He is an icon painter. A man in Augusta had a house he could live in and have a studio. He does these retreats all over the world on icon painting, and I was privileged to be a participant in this icon painting retreat. I didn't really know a whole lot about icons before I went. Presbyterians are kind of iconoclast. We're not really into a bunch of images or using images to pray. I went to learn and my interest in art was piqued, and so I went.

Father Damien, this monk, is one of the most amazing people that I have ever met. He is just so real. He was so full of wisdom and information. I learned so much about icons, and I learned so much about living out my faith through him. He was an amazing person and he had the most wonderful sense of humor. I remember I was working on my icon, and I was having a hard time with part of the face of this angel that I was painting when he said, "Valena, here. Let me help you out with that leprosy on that angel." He had a wonderful attitude. I was a protestant in the midst of all these Catholics and he was so gracious to me.

I realized that some of the people in this workshop had followed him around some. He's kind of a guru. Some of the women in this painting group had been painting icons for years and had been to several of Father Damien's workshops, so I was really intrigued. One of the ladies named Pat was an amazing woman of prayer. To paint an icon is more about prayer than it is the actual painting, and she was an incredible woman of prayer.

Pat turned to me one day and said, "You know what? I have been trying for years to find a gift that I can give Father Damien." Now, monks and nuns and priests take a vow of poverty. You can give them gifts, but they are probably not going to keep them; they are probably going to give them away. Pat had been trying to give him a gift that he could use to bring some healing to his own life. She had been to a workshop that he had been doing down in Georgia.

Summers are hot here, but I think they are even hotter in Georgia, and Father Damien doesn't have an ice maker. He uses ice cube trays. The thing about Father Damien is that, when he is teaching, he uses ice cube trays to mix the colors. And so, more often than not, he gives away his ice cube trays to his students so they can mix paints. Pat noticed this and, after praying about this, she found blue ice cube trays.

Let me tell you about blue ice cube trays. You cannot mix paint in blue ice cube trays because they will distort the color of the paint. So, at that retreat, Pat gave Father Damien these blue ice cube trays. It was a beautiful gift of the healing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And Father Damien is going to have cold water. That gift, that expression of healing, did not just pop up as Pat was walking through the aisles of Target. Those blue ice cubes tray were a product of prayer. They were a product of a desire to bring healing to someone that meant so much to her.

I think this is the kind of prayer that redeems, that we are called into as we pray through the entire world, as we pray for the nations that God desires to gather into himself. That desire, God's desire, is for us to pray fervently so that we can come to know the needs of those who are in Kenya, of those sweet children in Joy Home, of those in the community of Park Place and so we can know how we can impart and bring healing to these individuals. It is for us to pray for the families who are involved in our video jail ministry and how we can bring healing to them. How can we get close enough to pray for them, close enough to know how to bring the healing touch of the Gospel to their lives?

It gets even more personal than that. All of you have neighbors. All of you have a neighbor, I am almost guaranteed, whose whereabouts on Sunday mornings you don't know. You don't know if they go to Starbucks or to the soccer fields or church, but I challenge you to get to close enough to them to know if they need the healing touch, the Gospel. How is it that we can bring blue ice cube trays to our neighbors, to our community, to our world?

Let's pray.

Gracious and Holy God, we thank you for the power of prayer. We thank you that you have called us to be the light of the world. We pray, Lord Jesus, that you would use us, that you would give us the

strength to listen to you because we know that you know the hurts and deepest desires of your people. We pray that we would be your servants, that you would send us out so that we could bring the healing touch of the Gospel to a world that needs it so desperately. We thank you for the gift of prayer where we can open our lives to you. We pray, Lord, that you would use us, that your power would work through us so that others would come to know you and love you and serve you. It is in your powerful Name we pray. Amen

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