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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

November 11, 2018

IDOP Sunday

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, we just again thank you for your goodness, your grace, the fact that you have overcome evil with good, the ultimate good, the Lord Jesus Christ, and we thank you for that gift. And Lord, today is the day that we want to focus on our brothers and sisters who are living under persecution and the need we have for prayer for them. And so I pray today, Lord, as we open up your word, as we look into it, as we discuss what the persecuted church is going through that you would give us a renewed sense of a desire to support them in prayer and to understand just how critical our role in prayer is, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well as I said, this Sunday is IDOP Sunday. "IDOP," it stands for International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, and IDOP Sunday is really about two very distinct, very critical issues that the church is called to: one is prayer, and the other is the persecuted church. This is kind of the Sunday where we're going to put both of them together. It is a day where we turn our attention to prayer for those who are willing to pay the price of publicly

acknowledging Christ. And so this morning I basically just want to revisit the teaching on IDOP that I give every year and it's essentially a yearly report of our commitment to the persecuted church just kind of updated for where we are today. So pursuant to that, I'm going to kind of give a state of the church opinion on how we're doing so far, and so bear with me if you've heard this all before, but I want to start it by restating the official IDOP pronouncement. This is what they state. They say this: "The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP) is a global day of intercession for persecuted Christians worldwide. Its primary focus is the work of intercessory prayer and citizen action on behalf of persecuted communities of the Christian faith. We also encourage prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it."

You know we need a day like today because we are easily distracted from this task. There's the persecuted church who desperately needs our prayer and then there's us who desperately need to learn how to pray. And to do that we first need to understand the critical importance of what it means to pray for the persecuted church, and so this morning I want to start out by addressing the same question that I addressed a year ago. It's a very basic question that has to do with the whole idea of prayer and it's why should I? I mean especially that applies to us because we here at

Grace, we put an enormous stock into the sovereignty of God, and so I mean we believe that God controls every single molecule in the universe including the lives of the saints and their persecutors, and so if we believe that God's not walking around heaven biting his nails hoping things are just going to work out okay, then it begs a very important question. The question is this: If God truly is sovereign, why does he need us to pray for somebody on the other side of the world? I mean why can't we just say that part of the Lord's prayer that covers it all? I mean why can't we just say *thy kingdom come, thy will be done* and be done with it? I mean after all it is his kingdom and ultimately it's his will. So how can we imagine that a sovereign God is somehow stopped in his tracks by our failure to pray? Well he's not. Well then why does he still insist that we pray? Let me suggest to you some possibilities.

The very first one goes back to what I could be accused of harping on because I speak about it all the time, it's this idea that we are at war. Tom mentioned it this morning. We're on a war footing because we are at war. We are in the middle of a proxy war between two great kingdoms, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, and our role in this war is as bearers of God's image. We are the only creatures in all of creation who are given the task of bearing the image of God, and because of that we are

specifically targeted by God's enemy Satan. I mean we are the ones that Satan caused to fall by tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden so would it not follow that one of God's primary weapons against that same kingdom of darkness would be us, the very ones dragged into that darkness by Satan through the fall of Adam and Eve. Just think about this for a second. God is omnipotent, God is all powerful. He certainly could have destroyed Satan and the kingdom of darkness on his own by himself. After all Satan was created by God. But what if God in his wisdom elected to destroy Satan and the kingdom of darkness by redeeming and then employing the very image bearers that Satan had successfully corrupted, employing them as spiritual foot soldiers in an actual conflict? I mean Ephesians 6 tells us flat out, it says we are at war. It says: *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.* Now we don't do the actual wrestling here, I mean you and I have never gone mano-a-mano with an angel as far as I know but the angels can and do engage the enemy on a regular basis. What if that engagement is directly related to prayer? I mean what if God's kingdom has similar rules as ours?

You know when Hurricane Harvey struck the panhandle in Florida this year, you notice there was a huge change in the way we responded.

Our government was right there, it made a huge difference and we compare that and everybody compares that with Hurricane Katrina which was a nightmare. One of the biggest complaints about that hurricane was the response by our government in the hours right after the destruction. See, all of the resources of the federal government in many cases just sat there waiting to be utilized. They were never deployed. And it turns out that the reason why they were never deployed is because they were never asked for. You see the federal government in its wisdom decided long ago that it would be unwise for them to unilaterally decide to enter a state for any reason including disaster relief without an implicit invitation. I mean one of the major issues that has now been fixed was that states afflicted either forgot to ask or ignored that necessity. ABC News speaking in the aftermath of Katrina says: "There's no question the federal government plays a major role in disaster relief. But federal officials say in order to get involved, they must first be asked to do so by state officials." Here's the thought: What if God in his wisdom has a similar arrangement? I mean what if God demanded that all the angels in heaven had to wait to respond until they were asked by a human? It's not as far-fetched as it seems. I can't say with certainty that that's the way that heaven works, but in the tenth chapter of Daniel there's recorded a meeting that Daniel has with an angel and he says in *Daniel 10*: "*O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the*

words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you." And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. Then he said to me, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words." Here's an angel himself describing an action that he is taking directly as the result of a human being, Daniel, praying. I mean this angel came directly because of Daniel's prayer. Well, what if that's the norm? Well that would explain God's imploring of us to *pray without ceasing* as he does in *1 Thessalonians 5*, or when he says in *1 Timothy 2* where he says: *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people.* Or Jesus's own words in *Luke 18*, he says: *And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.* See there's no doubt that God sees our prayers as absolutely critical, and the organizers of IDOP understand that. This is their official statement on prayer for the persecuted church. They say: "We believe that prayer changes things. Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith. God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing. Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray."

And so once again this morning I just want to unpack that statement kind of line by line. The very first statement they say is: "We believe that prayer changes things." You've got to know that that's become a very tough sell to a culture that has grown to intensely resent prayer. You know after the Parkland shooting in Florida it seemed like prayer itself had reached its lowest possible ebb. The very idea of sending up prayers for a tragedy like Parkland became an excuse in the eyes of many for being willing to do nothing to change the status quo. Listen to what CNN said in one of its editorials. It said this: "Semantic satiation is the phenomenon which a word or phrase is repeated so often it loses its meaning. But it also becomes something ridiculous, a jumble of letters that feels alien on the tongue and reads like gibberish on paper. 'Thoughts and prayers' has reached that full semantic satiation. For the last few years, after every mass shooting, the term immediately trends on social platforms. It is not a good kind of trending: Among the earnest pleas for social and legislative action, the aftermath of each successive shooting inspires more and more memes and cynical jokes. In one highly shared image that circulated after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting in February, 'Thoughts and Prayers' is imprinted on the side of a garbage truck. Another meme shows an empty van. 'Excellent News' it reads. 'The first truckload of your thoughts and prayers has just arrived.' See, there's a popular notion today

and the popular notion about prayer is that it's a waste of time compared to actually doing something physically. And there's a part of that sentiment that I get, I mean, if politicians are simply using the empty rhetoric of false prayers as an excuse for inaction, then they're engaging in conduct that scripture itself decries. *James 2:17* says: *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.* I mean we know God expects both. And we know Nehemiah built a wall but he also posted a guard. I mean if prayer was nothing but an excuse for inaction, then people would have a point. But in this case many, many people have pure scorn for those who turn to God when things turn awful. I think there's a reason why many folks are upset and scornful about prayer and it's because they really have no idea what prayer is all about. And it begs the question. I mean, what do these folks who are so upset about praying think prayer is for? And what is their measure of effective prayer? I think most of these people equate prayer with magic. If the magic isn't working then it's really time to abandon it. You see the problem really isn't with prayer and its effectiveness, it's with the idea of what prayer is supposed to accomplish. You know, many of those folks who made their sentiments known think prayer is a way of kind of bending God's will to mine. They have it perfectly backwards. Prayer is God's way of bending my will towards his. And that primarily is all about lining my will up with the kingdom of God. See, it's been

said that the kingdom of God is a freight train and it is moving from eternity past through the present to eternity future and the final conclusion of all things. And there's three things that you can do with a freight train: You can oppose it, you can miss it, or you can get on board. Now oppose it in one way or another long term or short term, it's going to flatten you. I mean just ask Mao Tse Tung or Pol Pot or Joseph Stalin or any other atheist leader who thought that he was going to conquer the world and destroy God's kingdom on earth. They're now all dead and buried along with each of their fallen kingdoms that have now been consigned to the ash heap of history. You can try to oppose it. You can also miss it as many people do. They just let the kingdom pass them by by living their lives more or less like any other animal, thinking that what life consists of is eating, sleeping, and reproducing. I mean they don't bother God and they expect God to really not bother them. But they're mistaken. God says in *Philippians 3:18*: *For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame -- who set their mind on earthly things.*

You see you can oppose the kingdom or you can simply let it pass you by by setting your mind on earthly things or you can get on board. Prayer is how you get on board. It's how you begin to line

up your hearts, your minds, your spirit, and your body with the kingdom and its goals. The reason why people see prayer as so completely ineffective is because they've reduced prayer to magic. You know, God's the master magician, church is the physical place where the magic is expected to have a little extra umph. According to these folks, having your prayers go unanswered really means that prayer doesn't work. But that's not at all what prayer is about. You see if I pray as God would have me pray then what changes is not only the object of my prayer, it is the subject as well. I become more enabled to get on board with God and his kingdom. And to be sure, sometimes prayer includes the miraculous, I mean scripture is filled with instances where people pray and miracles happen because God can and does miraculously intervene in the lives of his children, but more often than not the miracle of prayer is that God gives something far more valuable than health or wealth or safety. Through prayer, God gives us his presence. And that power and that presence is what changes everything. It's what gives his saints the ability to handle anything that this world can throw at them. You see the promise of Christ is never: Well, if you do A, B and C and D, he's going to give you an easy life, a healthy life, a wealthy life, or a successful life. What he does promise us though is that no matter what life throws us, he will walk us through it. I mean: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.* Why? Why will you fear no

evil? Pretty scary walking through the shadow of death. Why? *Because You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* You see God promises us that he will accompany us in a way that only people who have been through that know. Those who are outside the immediate circumstances not having received that grace will either marvel at the strength that they see or they'll mock it, claiming it's a farce, claiming it's fake. I know that because I've been there myself, I've received that grace. It's been said before you don't get boiling oil grace until you fall into boiling oil. And that's what the persecuted saints understand. They understand that God's presence will sustain and empower you through anything that life can throw at you. And we discovered how that works in a book like Nik Ripken's *The Insanity of God*. I mean that book gave me an insight into how to pray for persecuted Christians like I had never had before.

This is what Ripken says. He says: "For decades the Western church has been taught to pray and work for an end to the persecution of fellow believers around the world. We enlist our congregations, our denominations, and even our governments to speak out and pressure oppressive regimes and hostile nations to end discrimination. Sometimes we even demand that the persecutors be punished." All well and good, but listen to what Ripken has to say about what the persecuted really, really want in our prayer. This

is what he says, he says: "We seem to forget that Jesus himself promised that the world would reject and mistreat his faithful followers just as it rejected him. Ruth" -- that's his wife -- "Ruth and I seldom encountered a mature believer living in persecution who asked us to pray that their persecution would cease. We have never heard that request." This is somebody who's interviewed over 800 persecuted saints. They never heard anybody say please pray that the persecution would stop. He says: "Rather, believers in persecution ask us to pray that 'They would be faithful and obedient through their persecution and suffering.'" Folks, that's a radically different prayer than I would have thought of but it tells us something critical about the value of God's presence. You see what God gives those suffering persecution in the gift of his presence is something they find so precious that even the persecution seems worth it. Ripken's book details people undergoing horrific persecution and insisting that it's a small price to pay for the gift they've received of this intense connection to God's Holy Spirit. That testimony alone is proof positive that prayer changes things. Now does prayer actually change things? Well, the actual answer is yes and no. I mean is it magic that's going to enable you to somehow manipulate God to do those things that you want him to do? No. Is it a means of changing virtually everything about me, whether it be physical, mental, spiritual, psychological or social, to line up my life with

where the kingdom is going? Yes. So yes, we can affirm the first statement: "We believe that prayer changes things."

The second statement, statement number two is: "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." Now to repeat what I said last time and it's been said that all answered prayer begins and ends in the throne room of God. You see when we pray, we become part of a complex process that God uses to move things on earth. You know when God wants to move a mountain, he doesn't just move the mountain. The very first thing he does is he moves some of us to pray that that mountain would be moved. And then in response to the prayer, he moves the mountain. See, ultimately God is behind everything we do including our prayer. And listen to what he says in *Philippians 2*, he says: *For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.* You know we get that.

You know oftentimes on Wednesday night when we gather for corporate prayer, we spend a few moments, we just are kind of silently ask God to take that time to use that moment to prompt us to give voice to the prayer that God wants to use us for. I mean we recognize how important the role is that we have because somehow our voices raised in prayer is crucial to the kingdom, and it is so crucial that God's Holy Spirit has to intercede in order to make that happen. *Romans 8:26* says this, it says: *Likewise the Spirit helps*

us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Let that hit you for a second. Just think about that. Our role in prayer is so crucial that God sends his Holy Spirit alongside us to guide us into the process. I mean God says that the Spirit recognizes that we are weak and that basically we pretty much stink at prayer. I mean we don't do prayer as we ought. He goes on to say that God who searches hearts already knows the mind of the Spirit and that the Holy Spirit's job or at least one of his jobs is to intercede for us according to God's will. It's like the Holy Spirit takes these earthbound sin-crusted efforts of human beings and he shapes them and then he polishes them and then he presents them to God the Father for a response. So the Holy Spirit of God works in us and within us to empower and translate our efforts. Just stop and think about you realize, realize how much effort God is putting into our prayer? I mean I can only imagine that it is ridiculously tedious and overwhelmingly inefficient to utilize creatures whose attention spans can be measured usually only in seconds, maybe in minutes, who frequently forget, who frequently pray for the wrong things or with the wrong motives and probably spend half of their time devoted to prayer daydreaming or just wandering around in a fog.

That's us, folks. Yet God says he sends his Holy Spirit to help us in that weakness. The only logical reason I can think of for God to go to such great lengths to involve us is that we have no idea how critical a role we play. The prophet Samuel gives us a hint of how important prayer is when he says this in *1 Samuel 12:23*, he says: *Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you.* You and I might not think that prayerlessness is sinful but according to the prophet Samuel it is, and because God's sovereign purpose is never thwarted when we sin by refusing to pray, he simply raises up another to take our place because the human aspect of prayer is that critical. So prayer is indeed a mystery, but it's one that human beings play a critical part in. So the second statement of IDOP is incredibly true, he says: "Exactly what happens in prayer is a mystery of faith." Much of it is still mysterious and the great mystery is that God will still make us a critical part of his work on earth.

Statement number three is that: "God invites us to present to Him our requests and to pray without ceasing." Well based on what we've said already, can you get an idea as to why? Why would God do that? It's because God stoops to conquer. See there's no question that anything that we can do obviously God can do better. So why does God waste all this time and effort inviting us to pray to him? I mean why does God stoop to involve us in his plan? Well

again, I think it has to do with who God has chosen to defeat the enemy. He's chosen us. *2 Corinthians 4* says: *For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.* I mean we've been given the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and we've been given it to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. You see I've often described our lives as our lives, we are the nexus, we are the prime connection in that proxy war that we see being played out between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. Understand, Satan cursed all of creation through Adam's fall. Jesus took on flesh and became one of us to become the second Adam and reverse that curse, and by his resurrection he is leading us as we take back the kingdom from Satan through prayer. Understand, Satan detests us not just because we are God's image bearers but also because Satan knows that his ultimate defeat is going to come not just through Jesus Christ's hands but through ours as well. And after all Satan's ultimate defeat came at the hands of Jesus Christ who was God become what? Become man. God tells us that our role in this battle is going to be accomplished: *Not by might, nor by*

power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts. So God stoops to conquer through us primarily through prayer. And the one thing that we seem to seldom acknowledge is the patience that God has to exercise in using us this way. Just think about this for second, just consider Canis Majoris. Canis Majoris was a recently discovered star 2.9 billion times bigger than the size of our sun. 3 billion times bigger than our sun. We just recently discovered that there are 2 billion -- "billion" with a "B" -- more galaxies than we thought existed. Not stars, galaxies each containing millions of stars. Now you got to understand, God made the earth and all of those stars as well in less than a week. And yet we have God's account that he waited years and years and years while Noah built his ark. I mean if God can speak Canis Majoris into being almost instantly, how quickly could he have created Noah's ark? But he didn't. I mean instead he chose to wait while Noah built it stick by stick by stick. I mean clearly God thought more of the importance of Noah's input than he did about his own efficiency, because God never chooses on the basis of ease or efficiency. And again we have to consider Satan himself. I mean why didn't God just take Satan out in the beginning when he rebelled? Why did God himself become one of us and live this spotless life and die the death we all deserved to die instead of just judging Satan's sin instantly? I mean, wouldn't that have solved the problem? Well it would have solved a problem but it

would not have solved God's problem because God's problem is us. We're the crown of his creation and God is committed to working through us. God has made us temporarily a little lower than the angels but that is just temporary. He tells us in *1 Corinthians 6: Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?* So we who are going to judge angels in the next life are to engage them in this one and we do it through prayer because God chooses to defeat the kingdom of darkness by engaging his image bearers on the front line of that war between the kingdoms. I mean God could have defeated Satan instantly but instead he chose to defeat Satan through the agency of human beings and you know why? Well again, Jesus gives us a hint in this conversation he has with Paul, in that conversation Jesus said that his strength was made perfect through our weakness. God has chosen as his weapons you and me, that is the church of Jesus Christ and he's quite blunt about telling us this is war and you are part of it. *For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh.* And like it or not God has tied his kingdom into our prayer. That's also why God says in *James 5: The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.* That's what God is showing us constantly in scripture.

God even gave us a literal picture of the power of prayer. It was right after Israel had escaped Egypt and they're on their way and

they get attacked by the Amalekites. And it was the most cowardly kind of an attack, it was an attack on the rear flank where the women and the children were. Now the Amalekites were the offspring of Esau. They were bitter foes then, they're bitter foes today. They're the forebearers of the present Arab world which still bitterly hates the Jews. Well Exodus describes the battle, it says this: *And Moses said to Joshua: "Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill. And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.*

Can you get the picture that God is painting here? Do you see what God is doing here? You know uplifted hands is the universal symbol of prayer. And here we see it, when hands are uplifted in prayer, victory is at hand; when the hands begin to droop, defeat is at hand. But notice, it's not the warriors who are growing exhausted, it's not the archers, it's not the charioteers, it's not the

swordsman who are growing weary. Who's growing weary? It's Moses, it's the prayer warrior. In fact it requires Aaron and Hur who has to come alongside Moses and lift his hands up. This is an amazing picture that God is showing us. God wanted Israel to know its very survival as a nation was a function of its corporate prayer. I mean I think it's safe to say that we're never going to know this side of heaven just how crucial our prayers are to all the churches that are under attack today. Moses grew physically exhausted. We grow mentally and spiritually exhausted because we don't understand the cause and so we doubt our effect. Statement three says: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." That's because God stoops to conquer, and we're the agency that he stoops through.

And finally there's the fourth statement, they say: "Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray." Well, the whole IDOP statement is an answer to the question of prayer that I raised at the start of this message and the question was: Why should I? Well let me just kind of review the bidding to see if we understand where our heads, our hearts, and our hands belong here. Just once again to quote IDOP: "We believe that prayer changes things." This is kind of the head part. Okay, is that true? Well, since we have been praying for the persecuted church, we've seen Gao

Zhisheng released from a Chinese prison, we've seen Saeed Abedini released from an Iranian prison, we've certainly seen Asia Bibi get released from a Pakistani prison. These are all individuals that we as a church have committed to prayer to and we, too, have been changed as we prayed. So is there any doubt that prayer changed these things?

Secondly they say: "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." And again, most folks think prayer is a form of magic. They don't realize that the greatest answer to prayer is the presence of Christ himself given to us through his Holy Spirit, and that presence is beyond mysterious to those outside of the faith. It's something that they choose to mock or deride because they can't possibly understand it. But we have the testimony of those who are in persecution. And the testimony of those caught up in persecution proves that those folks look at us, the non persecuted church, as the ones who have come up short. I mean those folks who are undergoing severe forms of persecution understand that they have -- they may have persecution, imprisonment, and sometimes torture with Christ right there beside them. But they look at us and we've got safety and comfort and Wal-Mart and Netflix. Whoop de doo. We're starving for God's presence. See, the mystery of faith is that the persecuted church is actually seeing itself as the blessed church. "God invites us to present to him our requests

and to pray without ceasing." That's the head part -- the heart part, I'm sorry. That's part number three. Again like Moses, as we lift our hands in prayer, the kingdom advances and when we grow weary or disheartened, the enemy advances.

And finally we have the fourth. The fourth part is this:

"Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure.

The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray." This is the

hand and the feet part. And the last sentence really says is it

all, it says: "The most we can do is also the least we can do."

You know there are two great categories of sins that Christians

deal with. There are sins of commission, that's things that we do

that we ought not to do but there are also are sins of omission,

things that we don't do that we are supposed to do. See we

evangelicals are very big on the former and very little on the

latter. We don't curse, steal, lie, cheat, or lust that much and

if we do we're very much aware that it's sinful. But I think that

we seldom think that God holds us accountable for things that we

simply forget to do or things that we just don't feel like doing.

Prayer is one of those things. *James 4:17* sums up God's opinion of

sins of omission, he says: *Therefore, to him who knows to do good*

and does not do it, to him it is sin. 1 Samuel narrows it down to

prayerlessness. He says: *Moreover, as for me, far be it from me*

that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you.

See, God has made it crystally clear what his expectations are concerning those who are being persecuted for Christ's sake. He made that clear in *Hebrews 13* which says this, it says: "*Remember the prisoners as if chained with them -- those who are mistreated -- since you yourselves are in the body also.*" God is referring to those who are persecuted for the gospel and he gives us a very simple one-word command. He says, "Remember." Now this is the challenge that I give every year. I say picture yourself, you're standing before God's bema seat of judgment and you're receiving your rewards and God is judging your life and he points out some very obvious things to you. He says this and he can say this to every one of us sitting in this room, he says, I placed you in the wealthiest country in the world. I placed you in the safest country on earth, in a place where you would never have to worry about whether or not you'd get enough food to eat or a roof over your head. I placed you in a place where you'd never have to worry about being yanked out of your house in the middle of the night and sent off to prison for proclaiming my name, and this much I ask of you: Remember the prisoners as if chained with them. Now imagine if God then asked you can you tell me the name of a single prisoner who you chose to remember? Can you show me that you cared enough to remember just one of them? Well, my answer would be Saeed Abedini in Iran and Gao Zhisheng in China and Asia Bibi in Pakistan and there are countless others. See, every Wednesday night we pray

through the Voice of the Martyrs prayer calendar for the week. We seek God's intervention for persecuted Christians all over the world.

You see, there's good news and there's bad news in this and the good news is that there are organizations like Voice of the Martyrs that now make it so incredibly simple and easy to pray for and care for our persecuted brothers and sisters that much of the heavy lifting is already done for us. The bad news is that we really have absolutely no excuse for refusing to remember our brothers and sisters. I subscribe to an email service that's part of Voice of the Martyrs, it's called "I Commit to Pray." Each week they send me three current prayer requests for persecuted brethren and all they ask for is a commitment to pray for them. So whenever I see it in my in box, I always stop right then and there, and I start, and I pray, I read through the stories and I pray for them. I make sure I do that right away. And what keeps me at it is the realization that even that microscopic level of commitment is something the enemy tries to stop, you know, the phone will ring or an article will catch my attention, something will come up but then I remember God's word which says: *To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.* You might say, oh, isn't that legalism? I mean that's not grace, that's law. Here's the rub. I'm only doing what James 4 tells me to do. I mean I know for me

the good that is necessary is to tell all of you what God's expectation of us is, and if I neglect to do that, for me that is sin. And actually according to IDOP it's not really a choice between grace and law, instead it's a choice between grace and disgrace. Let me tell you why. That proclamation that I read this morning, it called for prayer but not just for persecuted Christians. Listen to what it said. It said: "We also encourage prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it." You see, IDOP identifies three different levels of opposition to God's plan. There are oppressors, there are persecutors, and there are ignorers, that's folks who just didn't have the time or the energy to pray for the persecuted church. Now for many years most of us in this body were ignorers. I mean just too much stuff going on. We needed to prioritize our stuff. See a great many Christians really don't have a heart for prayer because they really don't get it. They wonder why a sovereign God needs the input of puny human beings and they don't realize the incredible privilege and the awesome responsibility that God has laid at our feet. And I understand that because for many, many years I didn't get it, but I get it now. Head, heart and hands I get it. And now is the time for all of us to get it as well. You know the world is never going to understand the power of prayer for the persecuted church. My question this morning is also my challenge, and the challenge is:

Do we?

Let me conclude by praying IDOP's formal prayer. They say: *"Let us pray to encourage and empower Christians to fulfill the Great Commission in areas of the world where they are persecuted for their involvement in propagating the gospel of Jesus Christ. To give relief to the families of Christian martyrs in these areas of the world. To equip local Christians to win to Christ those persecutors who are opposed to the gospel in countries where believers are actively persecuted for their Christian witness. To undertake projects of encouragement helping believers rebuild their lives and Christian witness in countries that have formerly suffered Communist oppression. To emphasize the fellowship of all believers by informing the world of atrocities committed against Christians and by remembering their courage and faith, Lord Jesus we pray. Amen.*