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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

November 21, 2021

IDOP Sunday

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, I thank you for your word, I thank you for what you have given to us, the gift of your Son, the gift of your word, the gift of folks throughout the world who are willing to proclaim your gospel no matter what the cost. This is the day where we celebrate those persecuted Christians. And so Lord, I pray this morning that you would give us the grace and the wisdom and the insight and the special power of your Holy Spirit to identify with them and to understand their plight and to particularly just gain an understanding of how incredibly important prayer for them is. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, this is the Sunday that we celebrate IDOP Sunday. Other churches do it different days but this is our particular day. And IDOP, in case you don't know, that means the international day of prayer for the persecuted church. And IDOP Sunday is about two very distinct and credible issues that the church is called to, one is prayer and the other is the persecuted church. And this is really the Sunday that we try to put both of those together. It's

a day given to turn our attention to prayer for those willing to pay the price of publicly acknowledging Jesus Christ.

So this morning I want to revisit our commitment as a church to the persecuted church. And pursuant to that I want to kind of give a state of the church opinion as to how we're doing. And so bear with me if you've heard it all before. I just want to restate what the official IDOP pronouncement about this day is all about, and then I want to give you four statements that they outline of what is the role for us as a church for the persecuted church. This is their official of official pronouncement. They say: "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."

We need a day like today because we're easily distracted from this particular task. I mean there is, as they've said, the persecuted church who desperately needs our prayer and then there's us who desperately need to pray. And to do that we first need to understand the critical importance of praying for the persecuted church. And so this morning I want to start out by addressing an

obvious but unspoken question. The question is: Why should I? I mean to put this cynically, we here at Grace, we put enormous stock in the sovereignty of God. We believe that God controls every single molecule in the universe including the lives of the saints and the lives of those who are persecuting them. And so it really begs the question, I mean, if God is truly 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? Why can't we just say "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" and be done with it? I mean after all it's his kingdom and it's ultimately his will.

So how can we imagine a sovereign God being somehow stopped in his tracks by my failure to pray? Well, he's not, but that brings up the question then why does he insist that we pray? Well, just allow me to suggest some possibilities. And the first one goes back to what I might seem to be harping on all the time. It's this idea that there's a war going on. There's a proxy war going on between two great kingdoms, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, and we are right in the middle of that war. Our role in this war is as the bearers of God's image. We're the only creature in all of creation who is given the task as image bearers, 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, and so would it not follow that one of God's primary weapons against the kingdom of darkness would be us, the very ones who were dragged into that darkness by Satan through the fall of Adam and Eve. I mean, just think about this for a second. I mean, okay, we understand God is omnipotent, he's all powerful, he certainly could have destroyed Satan and the kingdom of darkness on his own by himself. After all, we know that Satan was created by God. I mean what if God in his wisdom elected to destroy Satan and the kingdom of darkness not by himself but by redeeming and then employing his very image bearers that Satan had fully corrupted as spiritual foot soldiers in an actual conflict? I mean *Ephesians 6:12* tells us flat out, 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 you see we don't do the actual wrestling here. You and I have never gone toe-to-toe with a fallen angel, but angels can and do engage the enemy on a regular basis. What if the angels in heaven, what if they have to wait to hear from us before they act? I mean what if God's kingdom was similar to ours. You know, when Hurricane Harvey struck the Florida panhandle many years ago, well actually about five or six years ago, our federal government was there to help and it made a huge difference but it

pointed out a contrast to what happened if you remember with Hurricane Katrina. One of the biggest problems about that hurricane was the response by our government in the hours right after that destruction. You see all of the resources of the federal government in many cases, they just sat there. They just sat there waiting to be utilized. 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 long ago decided that it would not be wise for the federal government to unilaterally decide we're going to go into a state for any reason whatsoever, including disaster relief, unless they're asked. Well, one of the major issues that has now been fixed was that during Hurricane Katrina, nobody asked. Well, what if God in his wisdom had a similar arrangement? This is just postulating. You know, what if God demands that all of his angels in heaven have to wait to respond until they're asked by humans? I mean it's not as far-fetched as it seems, I mean, I can't say with certainty that that's the way that heaven works but if you look at the tenth chapter of Daniel, there's recorded there a meeting that Daniel has with an angel. It's one of those rare times where angel and human meet. And this is what takes place. This is *Daniel 10*.

The angel says: *"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." This is an angel himself, he's describing an action that he's taken that's the direct result of a human being -- Daniel -- praying. I mean the angel came directly because of Daniel's prayer. What if that's the norm? I mean that would explain why God is constantly imploring us as he does in 1 Thessalonians 5: Pray without ceasing, or 1 Timothy 2: First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, or Jesus' own words in Luke 18: And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

There's no doubt that God sees our prayers as absolutely critical, and it's something that the organizers of IDOP, they understand that. This is their official statement about prayer for the persecuted church. This is what they say, four statements they say. They said: "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."

So this morning, once again, I want to unpack that statement line by line, and we want to look at these four different statements that they've made. And the first statement is: "We believe that prayer changes things." That's a tough sell today. After the Parkland shooting in Florida, awful, awful thing happened, it seemed like there was all kinds of prayers that went up, and it seemed like the idea of prayer itself reached its lowest ebb. The very idea of sending up prayers for a tragedy in Parkland became an excuse in the eyes of many for being willing to do nothing to change the status quo. Listen to how CNN described prayer at that time. They said this:

(CNN) Semantic satiation is the phenomenon in 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's 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."

I mean that sums it up, the popular notion about prayer, it's a waste of time. It's an incredible waste compared to actually doing something. Well, there's a part of that that I get. I mean, if politicians are simply using the rhetoric of false prayers as an excuse for inaction, they're engaging in conflict that scripture itself decries. *James 2:7* says: *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.* I mean we know God expects both. You go back to Nehemiah, you see that's kind of the model for us, he built a wall and prayed at the same time. You can do two things at once. If prayer was nothing but an excuse for inaction, then people would have a point. But in this case many people have pure scorn for those who turn to God when things turn awful. And the reason why many folks who are upset and scornful about prayer is because they have no idea what prayer is about. And again it begs the question, I mean, why do these folks who are so upset about praying, what do they think prayer is for and what is their measure of what would be effective prayer? I think most of these people equate prayer with magic, and clearly the magic's not working, so it's time to abandon it. The problem isn't really with prayer and its effectiveness, it's with the idea of what prayer is supposed to accomplish.

I mean many of those folks who made their sentiments known think prayer is a way of kind of bending God's will so that it lines up with mine. That's perfectly backwards. Prayer is God's way of bending my will so that it starts to line up with his, and that's primary about lining my will up with the kingdom of God. I mean it's been said the kingdom of God is a freight train and it's moving through eternity past right through the present through eternity future and the conclusion of all things. There's three things that you can do with a freight train: You can stand in the way, you can get out of the way, or you can get on board. I mean stand in the way in one way or another long term or short term, it will flatten you. Just ask Mao Tse-tung or Joseph Stalin or Pol Pot or any other atheist leader who thought he was going to conquer the world and destroy God's kingdom on earth. I mean, they're all now dead and buried with all of their fallen kingdoms that have been consigned to the trash heap of history. Well you can also just get out of the way. And many, many people do just that. They just let the kingdom pass them by by living their lives more or less like any other animal, thinking that life itself consists only in sleeping and eating and reproducing. They don't bother God and they sure hope that God doesn't bother them, but they're totally mistaken. God says in *Philippians 3*, he says: *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. So you can oppose the kingdom or 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 spirits, and your bodies with the kingdom and its goals.

I mean the reason why people see prayer as so completely ineffective is because they've reduced prayer to magic. I mean God is the master magician and the church is this kind of mystical place where the magic is expected to have its greatest strength. According to those folks, having your prayers go unanswered really means a prayer just doesn't work. But that's not what prayer is about. You see, if I pray as God would have us pray, then what changes is not only the object of my prayer but the subject as well. I become more and more enabled to get on board with God and his program. And you know, sometimes prayer includes the miraculous, I mean, scripture is filled with instances where people prayed and miracles happened because God can and he does miraculously intervene in the lives of his children. But more often than not the miracle of prayer is God gives us something much more valuable than health or wealth or safety. He gives us something you just can't put your finger on: He gives us his presence. And that power and that presence changes everything.

That's what gives his saints the ability to handle anything that this world can throw at them.

See, the promise of Christ has never been that if you do A, B, C, and D, then I will give you an easy life, a healthy life, a wealthy life, a successful life. What he does promise us, though, is though no matter what life hands you, no matter what, I will be there with you. I will walk you through this. That's the promise. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Why? For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* That's God's promise that he will accompany us in a way that only the people who've been through it can understand. I mean there are those outside of the immediate consequences not having had received that grace who will either marvel at the strength that they see in you or they will mock it. They will mock it claiming it's a farce. And I know because I've been there myself. I've received that grace. I've said it many, many times, you don't get boiling oil grace until you actually land in boiling oil. But that's what the persecuted saints understand. They understand that God's presence will sustain and empower them through anything that life can throw at them.

And we discovered how that works in books like Nik Ripken's *The Insanity of God*. That's an amazing book. I highly recommend it.

One of my top fives of all time, that book *The Insanity of God*. In it he gave us an insight into how to pray for persecuted Christians. It's an insight I 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."

But here's what Ripken has to say about what the persecuted really want in their prayer. He says -- quote -- "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 have seldom encountered a mature believer living in persecution who asked us to pray that their persecution would cease. We have never heard that request. Rather, believers in persecution ask us to pray that 'they would be faithful and obedient through their persecution and suffering.'"

That's a radically different prayer. And it tells us something critical about the value of God's presence. You see, those who God gives to suffering understand that the gift of his presence is so precious that even persecution is worth it. Ripken's book depicts

people undergoing horrific persecution and they're all saying the same thing, they're saying, it's a small price to pay for what I've received, which is an intense connection to God's Holy Spirit. And that testimony alone is proof positive that prayer changes things. Now, does prayer actually change things? Well the answer is yes and no. Is it magic that will enable you to somehow manipulate God to get him to do things that you want him to? No. Is it a means of changing virtually everything about me, whether it be physical, mental, spiritual, psychological, or social, to line my life up with what the kingdom is going? Yes. So yes, we affirm the first statement: We believe that prayer changes things.

Well, the second statement says: "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." And again, to repeat what I said last time, literally all answered prayer begins and ends in the throne room of God. This is something unique about prayer that we need to really grasp. You see, when we pray we are really part of a complex process that God uses to move things on earth. I've said it many, many times, when God wants to move a mountain he doesn't go -- "Move." He doesn't first move the mountain. He first moves people to start praying for that mountain to be moved and then in answer to prayer, he then moves the mountain. You see, ultimately God is behind everything we do including even our prayer. Listen to how he puts it in *Philippians 2*. He says: *For it is God who works in*

*you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. We try to understand that practically. Sometimes on Wednesday nights we gather for corporate prayer, we spend a few moments just asking God to work in us, asking God to speak through us, that his Holy Spirit might -- might prompt us to pray the prayers that he wants us to pray. And we recognize that somehow our voices raised in prayer is crucial to the kingdom, so crucial that God says he uses his Holy Spirit to intercede to make that happen. Listen to how he puts it in Romans 8. He 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 hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.**

Now you need to think about this for a second. Just bathe in that for a moment intellectually. What God is saying to us is your role in prayer is so critical that God himself will come alongside you and guide you through it and help you do it. God says the Spirit recognizes that we are weak. What he's nicely saying is you pretty much stink at this. You're awful at it. He says we don't do prayer as we ought. That's his words. He goes on to say that God searches hearts and as he searches hearts, he already knows the mind of the Spirit and the Holy Spirit's job, at least one of his

jobs is to intercede for us according to God's will. It's like the Holy Spirit takes these earth bound, sin-crusted efforts of human beings and then he shapes them and he polishes them and then he presents them to God the Father for a response. So the Spirit of God works in and with us to empower and translate our prayers. I mean, I don't think we realize just how much effort God puts into our prayers. As I've said, I can only imagine that it's ridiculously tedious and overwhelmingly inefficient to utilize creatures whose attention span is measured mostly in seconds, rarely in minutes, who frequently forget, who frequently pray for the wrong things or with the wrong motives and probably spend half of the time that they devote to prayer daydreaming or wandering around in a fog. But that's what God deals with.

So God says he sends his Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness. And 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 prayer wise how critical the role we play is. Now the prophet Samuel gave a hint of how important prayer is when he said this in *1 Samuel 4:12*. He said: *"Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you."* I mean 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 just simply

raises up another to take our place, because that human aspect of prayer is that critical. Prayer is indeed a mystery but one that human beings play a critical part in. And so that second IDOP statement is true, exactly what happens in prayer is a mystery of faith. Much of it is still mysterious. And the great mystery is that God would make us such a critical part of his work on earth.

In statement number three he says: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." And again go back to that same question, I mean, God clearly stoops to conquer. We say but why? I mean there's no question that anything we could do God can do much, much better. So why would God waste all that time and effort inviting us to pray to him? I mean why does God stoop so much to involve us in his plans? Well, I think it all has to do with who God has chosen to defeat the enemy. He's chosen us. He said you're it. *2 Corinthians* says this, he 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, that's a lot of words there. It's hard to kind of grapple with what he's saying there. But what he's saying is we've been given the light

of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That's been given to you. And he says and you've been given it to show the surpassing power belongs to God and not us. I mean I've often described our lives as the nexus. We are the connection in that proxy war that's being played out between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. You go back, Satan cursed all of creation through Adam's fall, and then we have Jesus taking on flesh, becoming one of us as the second Adam to reverse that curse, and by his resurrection he's leading us as we take back the kingdom from Satan through prayer. You've got to understand, that's why Satan detests us. Not just because we are God's image bearers but also because Satan understands that his ultimate defeat would come not just through Jesus Christ's hands but through ours as well. Just think about it: Satan's ultimate defeat came at the hands of Jesus Christ who is God become one of us, a 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 our prayer. And one thing we seldom acknowledge is the patience that God has to exercise in using us this way. Just consider for a moment, consider just one star. This is a recently discovered star, Canis Majoris it's called. It's 2.9 billion times more powerful than our sun. Okay. Kind of big. It was spoken into existence by God in

one day. I mean we've recently discovered two billion more galaxies. These are not stars, these are galaxies each of which has billions of stars. We've just discovered there's two billion more than we thought. God created all of them in a day. Okay. And we have also by God's account that he waited years and years for Noah to build his ark. I mean if God can speak *Canis Majoris* into being almost instantly, how quickly do you think he could have made an ark? But instead he waited for Noah to build it stick by stick by stick, year after year after year. Clearly God thought a lot more of the importance of Noah's input than he did about his own efficiency and because God never chooses on the basis of ease or efficiency.

And again, consider Satan himself, I mean, why didn't God just take Satan out when he rebelled? Why didn't he just take care of that first and foremost? Why did God himself become one of us, lead a spotless life and then suffer the death that we deserved to die instead of just judging Satan's sin right there -- Boom! You're gone. I mean, wouldn't that have solved the problem? Well, it would have solved a problem but not God's problem. God's problem is us. We are the problem. We are the crown of his entire creation and God is committed to working his will through us. God has made us temporarily a little lower than the angels, but that's 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, we are to engage them in this one through prayer. And God chooses to defeat the kingdom of darkness by engaging his image bearers on the front line of that war that's going on right now between the kingdoms. God could have easily defeated Satan instantly. He created him. But instead he chooses to defeat Satan through the agency of human beings and you know why? Well Jesus gives us a hint of it in his words to Paul. Jesus says *his strength is made perfect through our weakness*. What God is saying is I've chosen my weapon. It's you. You're the weapon. You are who I will defeat Satan through, that is the church of Jesus Christ. He's very blunt about telling us. He says this is war. And guess what, you're part of it. You've been conscripted. *2 Corinthians 10: For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh.*

Like it or not God has tied his kingdom into our prayer. That's why God says: *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much*. And it's what God shows us constantly in scripture. I mean God even gave us, he gave us at one point a literal picture of the power of our prayer. It was during Israel's very first battle. It was a sneak attack on their rear flank by the Amalekites. And the Amalekites were the offspring of Esau. They were bitter foes of Israel way back when; they're bitter foes

today. These are the forebearers of the present day Arab world which still bitterly hates the Jews. But Exodus describes this battle that takes place. Listen to how they describe it. This is *Exodus 17*. Says: *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.*

I mean, do you see the picture that God is trying to paint here? I mean it's amazing what he's saying. Uplifted hands, that's the universal symbol of prayer. And what God is showing us here is that when hands were uplifted in prayer, victory is at hand. When those hands start to droop, defeat is at hand. But notice something. It's not the warriors who are growing exhausted, it's not the charioteers, it's not the archers, it's not the swordsmen growing weary, it's Moses. It's the prayer warrior. In fact it's

Aaron and Hur who have to come alongside Moses and physically lift his arms up. God's painting an amazing picture. What he wants Israel to know is that its very survival as a nation was keyed into their corporate prayer.

And I think it's safe to say we'll never know this side of heaven how crucial our prayers are to all of the churches that are under attack today. I mean Moses grew physically exhausted, we grow mentally and spiritually exhausted because we don't understand the cause. What's the point? Because we don't understand the cause, we doubt the effect. Statement three says: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing," because God stoops to conquer and we are the agency that he stoops to work through.

And finally there's the fourth statement. Fourth statement says this: "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 very beginning of this message, and the question was: Why should I? Well, let's just review the bidding to see if we understand what I've been saying, where our hands, our hearts, and heads belong here. And again, I just want to go back and quickly go over, number one, first statement of IDOP: "We

believe that prayer changes things." That's the head part. Has that happened? Have we seen that work? Well, we saw Gao Zhisheng get released from a Chinese prison, we saw Saeed Abedini get released from an Iranian prison, we saw Asia Bibi get released Pakistani prison. Those are three people that we as a church committed to pray for. So I don't think there's any doubt that prayer changes things.

Number two says: "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." And again, most folks think that prayer is some kind of magic that people do. 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 who are outside of the faith. It's something they choose to mock or deride because they can't possibly understand it. But the testimony of those caught up in persecution proves that those folks look to us as the ones who have come up short. I mean these folks, they have persecution, they have imprisonment, they sometimes have to deal with torture, but they have Christ right there beside them. What do we have? We have safety, we have comfort, we have the American dream, and we're starving for God's presence. The mystery of faith is that the persecuted church is actually the blessed church.

Number three: "God invites us to present to him our requests and

to pray without ceasing." This is the heart part. And again like Moses, we lift up our hands in prayer and the kingdom advances. We grow weary, grow disheartened, the enemy advances. Number four: "Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure, the most we can do is the least we can do -- pray." Obviously this is the hands and feet part.

And that last sentence really says it all, says: "The most we can do also is the least we can do." I mean you know there's two great categories of sins that Christians deal with. We have sins of commission, those are things that we do that we know we ought not to do. But there's also sins of omission, those are things that we don't do that we know we're supposed to do. We evangelicals, we're very big on the former, very little on the latter. By and large we don't curse, steal, lie, cheat or lust much and if we do, we know we've done wrong, we know it's bad. But I think we seldom think that God's going to hold us accountable for things that we simply forget to do or for things that we just don't feel like doing. Prayer is one of those things. *James 4:17* sums up God's opinion of the sins of omission. He says: *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.* And again, *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."* So God has made it crystal clear what his

expectations are concerning those who are being persecuted for Christ's sake. This is what he calls on us to do. He says this in *Hebrews 13:3*. He says: "*Remember the prisoners as if chained with them -- those who are mistreated -- since you yourselves are in the body also.*" Now God was referring to those persecuted for the gospel and he gives a very simple one-word command to us: I want you to remember them.

Well, here's the challenge I've given many times. I said picture yourself, you've died, you're now standing at the bema seat judgment to receive your rewards and God is judging your life and he points out to you some very obvious things. He says, hey, I placed you in the wealthiest country in the entire world, in the safest country in the entire world, in a place where you'd never, ever have to worry about getting enough food to eat or a roof over your head or somebody pulling you out in the middle of the night, yanking you out in the middle of the night, putting you in jail because you proclaimed the name of Christ. But I asked of you one thing: *Remember the prisoners as if chained with them*. Just imagine if God then asked you: Can you tell me the name of a single prisoner whom you chose to remember? Can you share show me that you cared enough to remember just one of them, just one? Well, my answer would be Saeed Abedini in Iran or Gao Zhisheng in China or Asia Bibi in Pakistan. I don't know if you remember but

Elvia recently organized a Wednesday night prayer meeting where we were able to read off the names of all the Nigerian believers, these girls who were kidnapped. I think there was some 147 names, I believe. The point being is their names matter.

And there's countless others. 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. And there's good news and bad news in all of this. The good news is that these organizations like *Voice of the Martyrs*, they 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 has been done for us. The bad news is that we really have no excuse whatsoever for refusing to remember our brothers and sisters.

Just another for instance, I subscribe to an email service called "I Commit to Pray." Every week, every Friday they send me three current prayer requests that are from persecuted brethren and all they ask is would you pray for these three people. And so whenever I see it in my in box, it's like an alarm goes off that says stop what you're doing, take thirty seconds, sixty seconds and pray for these people. I mean this week is Dai Zhichao along with his wife and his two sons. He's a pastor at the Early Rain Church in China.

He was detained, he was beaten, he was persecuted for being part of this church. There was also Sheikh Ashim Hussein who's the father of nine children in Ethiopia who's being persecuted because he left his love for Christianity. There's also a request to pray for an unregistered church in Kazakhstan. This is a church that was raided and its members all fined and government monitors now sit there every week. What these folks are asking for, they don't want money, they want prayer. They want people to care. And what keeps me at that little task is the realization that even that microscopic level of commitment, that's something the enemy tries to stop. I mean I'll start looking at it, the phone will ring, an article will grab my attention, something will come up and then I remember God's word which says: *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.*

You might say that sounds awfully legalistic. 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 the good that's necessary. For me that's to tell you all what God's expectation of you is. So if I neglect to do that, for me that's sinful. Actually according to IDOP it's not really a choice between grace and law, it's a choice between grace and disgrace. You see, that proclamation that I read this morning at the very, very beginning, it called for prayer not just for persecuted Christians. It also said this, it might have slipped

under your radar. It says: "We also encourage prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it." So 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 for the persecuted church. For many years most of us, myself included, were ignorers, there's just too much stuff going on. But we needed to prioritize our stuff. And a great many Christians don't really have a heart for prayer because they don't really get it, they don't get the point of it. Wonder why in the world would a sovereign God want the input of puny human beings? 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. I get it now. Head, heart, and hands, I get it. But now is the time for all of us to get it as well. You see, the world is never, never going to understand the power of prayer for the persecuted church. So my question and my challenge for us this morning is do we?

Let me conclude with IDOP's specific 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. And finally, to emphasize the fellowship of all believers by informing the world of atrocities committed against Christians and by remembering their courage and faith. These things we pray, and God's people said, amen.