

TEACH US TO PRAY

Week Six | November 19, 2017 | How to Pray to Advance the Gospel

PREPARATION

MONDAY THROUGH WEDNESDAY

Spend some time alone in God's Word reading through Matthew 9:36–38, Luke 10:1–3, and Ephesians 6:18–20. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truths of this text and allow you to teach it well to those in your care.

THURSDAY THROUGH SATURDAY

Read through the questions included in the guide this week. Many questions have been included in this lesson for discussion. Determine which questions will work well to encourage, push, and grow your group in the best way.

DAILY

As you prepare, pray for the preaching of God's Word this coming week at the corporate church gathering. Pray also for your time together as a group, that the Spirit would make effective your teaching and bring gospel clarity, gospel change, and a heart for gospel mission to those who are present.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL REALITY

To properly pray for the gospel's advancement, we must believe God is the Lord of the harvest, petition Him to send out laborers, and ask Him to equip laborers with words and boldness in their witness.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Praying for gospel-laborers to advance the good news is one of the ways God has ordained for His message to spread. To avoid praying for this need is to avoid one of Christ's clear commands and methods for getting the gospel to the nations.

MEDITATE

“Pray also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:19–20).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

- Q: *When you pray for the gospel to advance throughout the earth, what specific requests show up in your prayers?*
- Q: *When facing serious opposition to the gospel, how do you respond?*
- Q: *When you hear the term "laborer for the gospel," what mental images come to mind?*

In the action packed, science-fiction book series called "Z," a father (Oldman) and his son (Adam) help save the world from an evil organization called Geneflow. Geneflow wants to end life on earth in favor of creating a world of hyper-evolved, genetically-enhanced beings. In a scene from one of the books in the series, *Z. Apocalypse*, Adam is about to make contact with Keera, a deadly dinosaur-like creature, as an interrogator. This is a role he must play to save the world. In a climactic moment, Adam is outfitted with the headset and his dad leans over to comfort him, saying, "I'll tell you what to say through your earpiece. There are cameras all around, and we'll be monitoring everything from the control room." Though Adam is terrified to engage the beast, he trusts his father will give him the right words at the right time. He is also reassured by the knowledge that, from the control room, his dad can see everything and override anything he wants to during the process. This comfort gives Adam boldness in his mission, and he presses onward.

Surprisingly, this science-fiction story is full of similarities to the way both Jesus and Paul tell us to approach praying for the gospel's advancement throughout the world. As we study their instructions, we are reminded that we can't fulfill our mission without the One who has control over the entire process. Adam's dad is like God, the one in the "control room," with the power to monitor every step of the journey through his omnipresent eyes (or "cameras"). He gives the resources necessary to make the mission work (like the "headset") and has the ability to intervene at any point necessary. He can even provide the words we need to speak. In the face of various beasts (or "wolves" as Jesus calls them), we have the ability to lean into God (or "Lord of the harvest"), who is in control, as we continue to share the gospel in boldness. With God looking down over us and "speaking into our earpiece," we can always fulfill His commands to advance the gospel.

♀: *If you don't often pray for the gospel's advancement around the world, what holds you back from praying this frequently?*

♀: *What particular part of the world or missions organization captures your attention and passion? Why?*

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

At this point in our series, we've studied how to pray in good times, how to pray in bad times, how Jesus prayed for us, how to pray for other believers, and how to pray when we've messed up. In our last lesson, we will explore a major topic of prayer that both Jesus and Paul find important: praying for the gospel to advance. As Jesus sends out His disciples to spread the good news, He has a particular prayer He wants them to pray as they go. Paul, writing from prison, also has a particular prayer he wants the Ephesians to pray over him so that he remains faithful in his gospel witness. As we study both these cases, we will learn that God wants us to incorporate these three requests in our prayers for the gospel's advancement:

1. **PRAY FOR GOD TO SEND LABORERS OUT**
2. **PRAY FOR GOD TO GIVE LABORERS WORDS**
3. **PRAY FOR GOD TO GRANT LABORERS BOLDNESS**

GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.*

PRAY FOR GOD TO SEND LABORERS OUT

■ **MATTHEW 9:36-38 AND LUKE 10:1-3**

♀: *What similarities do you see in these two passages? Differences?*

♀: *What do you think is the main point of both these passages?*

♀: *In what spheres of your life do you see an overwhelming amount of lostness?
How do you usually respond when you are overcome by this?*

In both these passages, we can see that Jesus is concerned about a shortage of something vital to the advancement of the gospel, laborers. Given that these men lived in a very agricultural setting, Jesus often used earthy examples to communicate important lessons to them, and this case is no exception. As He considers the task of spreading the gospel throughout the entire world, Jesus instructs His disciples to do something unexpected. While the world would approach a massive need by strategizing, calling a board meeting, or sitting down with an expert on “going viral,” Jesus tells His disciples to *pray*. Don’t plan first; pray. Don’t strategize first; seek. Don’t arrange things first; *ask*. Jesus knows that though the disciples may want to start by making their own plans, God’s purposes will prevail (Prov. 19:21), and therefore they should consult with Him first.

♀: *Why do we sometimes immediately resort to raising up our own strategies in spreading the gospel, instead of asking God to raise up laborers?*

As we pay careful attention to Christ’s words, we notice a few similar things mentioned in both accounts. First, Jesus tells us *who* to pray to, as He calls God the “Lord of the harvest.” Though there is a vast field of non-believers who are ripe and ready to be “harvested” into God’s Kingdom, *God* is the Master of that harvest. He has control over all, including both believers and non-believers. *He’s in control of the harvest*, and no strategy or human effort will change that. He’s the one who created the lost crowds to begin with. He’s the one who softens the heart of non-believers to hear the gospel with receptive ears (Prov. 21:1; Acts 16:14). He’s the one who causes growth (1 Cor. 3:6). And He’s the one who *always* accomplishes His will in the lives of earthy humans and even heavenly beings (Dan. 4:35). It’s no wonder Jesus then follows up by calling it “*His* harvest.” If the disciples want to labor for the sake of the gospel among the lost, that’s wonderful; but they will have to trust that the Father is the ultimate hand behind the

“sickle,” guiding all the conversions that will or will not take place. As they enter into the fields of gospel-ministry and missions, they first need to prayerfully engage with the One who has ultimate authority over those fields.

Next, as His disciples engage the Lord of the harvest, Jesus tells them *what* to ask, namely, to “send out laborers.” Notice that Jesus does not tell His disciples to ask the Father to simply save lost souls, as if He would zap unbelievers with faith from heaven out of nowhere. Instead, He instructs the disciples to pray for laborers to be sent out. While God could certainly save anyone with the snap of a finger, void of human interaction, the Lord does not choose to approach the salvation of souls that way. Instead, He sends ordinary people into the lost fields to spread His message. The Lord of the harvest is not just a God who *saves* people from lostness, He’s the God who *sends* people into lostness. Salvation does not usually happen apart from someone being sent. Jesus, His own incarnation being evidence of this very principle, knows the way the Father wants the gospel to spread. In this knowledge, Christ tells His disciples to pray something directly in line with the way God works, to raise up laborers and send them out.

❏: *Why is it better for God to choose and send laborers into his harvest, instead of humans being the ultimate decider of these things?*

❏: *What is Jesus’ motive for instructing the disciples to pray for laborers? What warning does he give them as he sends them out? How does this inform your own daily ministry to lost souls, and your prayers for missionaries who are advancing the gospel overseas?*

Both Matthew and Luke offer a unique perspective on Jesus’ command for us to pray to the Lord of the harvest. Though both authors include Christ’s clear instruction, Matthew offers us Jesus’ *motive* beforehand. He looked at the crowds and was overcome with *compassion* for them. Their leaders had failed them, and they wandered aimlessly with no one to guide them, as lost sheep without a faithful shepherd. Christ wants more for His people than the confusion and chaos they were left in, and Matthew makes sure to include this detail before lowering the boom about the need to advance the gospel. Through this passage, we see that the lost, wandering souls around are not the enemy. Jesus approaches them with *compassion*, and so should we as we bring the gospel to them. Many Christians treat nonbelievers harshly and angrily. We must take Jesus’ posture of love, and remember we were once just as lost and veiled to the gospel, but Christ entered in and saved us. We must always remember Matthew’s crucial principle: advancing the gospel is done out of compassion. Nik Ripken, in his book *The Insanity of God*, sums it up well as he recalls some difficult times while advancing the gospel

in foreign places. “I had to work hard to remember that neither Islam nor Muslims were the real enemy here. Lostness was the enemy. The enemy was the evil that viciously misleads and traps people like lost sheep without a shepherd.”

Q: *According to Luke, what does Jesus command after he tells the disciples to pray? How does this challenge you in your own witness?*

Luke offers two other important elements to Jesus’ command. First, once we pray to the Lord of the harvest, we should consider *ourselves* laborers, and *go!* Jesus does not tell them to pray for God to raise up laborers, and then go along their merry way, hoping the Lord will use someone else to reach the nations with the gospel. Instead, Christ immediately follows the command to pray with the command to *go* ahead of Him, preparing the way for His spiritual work. Even today, while we pray for the advancement of the gospel around the world, we must also consider how we can prepare the way for Christ to change the hearts of the lost. As we pray, we must also *go*. Whether it’s to our neighborhoods, our work places, our book clubs, our gyms, or even another country, should God call us there, we are *all* laborers bringing the gospel to the particular field the Lord has laid in front of us.

Q: *How does Jesus’ view of some in the lost world balance Luke’s view? What’s the difference between a sheep and a wolf?*

Next, Luke shows us that though Jesus is compassionate about the lostness of the world, He is not naïve. There are those who will respond graciously to the witness of the disciples as they go out, but many will not. Jesus is brutally honest about the challenges ahead, telling His disciples that He is sending them out “as sheep among wolves.” Here we see that Jesus does not see all crowds as lost, helpless sheep. He introduces the idea of a wolf, a predator preying on the sheep and out for the flock’s demise. Here, Jesus is affirming that the reality of being ostracized, slandered, and persecuted is surely coming their way (just as it did for Christ), and the disciples must be prepared for it. Instead of coddling the laborers with a motivational speech, Jesus is blunt. He wants them to be as innocent and dependent as sheep as they face wolves that are out to tear them limb from limb. He is sending them out just as He was sent out by the Father, the innocent Lamb of heaven slain by the ravenous and rebellious wolves of earth. Even as Jesus was sent out to minister to His brutal enemies in the Father’s name, so too the disciples are sent out to minister in the name of the Son. Some will even try (and succeed, as

history tells us) to nail them to a tree for their message, just as they did their Lord. For some, the Christian message is the fragrance of life and power, and for others, it is the stench of death and offensiveness (2 Cor. 2:15–17; 1 Cor. 1:18). Jesus is well aware of these various responses His disciples will face as they go, and He prepares them (and us!) for it.

We must learn to be sober-minded about the “wolves” we will face as the gospel goes out through our own witness. Knowing we will likely face difficulty or even harm for the sake of the gospel should not stop us, given all the other things we are willing to give our lives to. Again, Ripken summarizes this issue well. “How is it, I wondered, that so many people are willing to die for financial or humanitarian reasons while many Christian groups insist on waiting until it is safe to obey Jesus’ command to ‘go’ into all the world? Jesus commanded His followers to go into ‘all the world’—not only into all ‘the safe places in the world.’”

Clearly, Jesus teaches that safety isn’t our goal as Christians. Advancing the gospel is! Luke’s detail should also lead us to pray urgently for missionaries around the world who currently face persecution for their message. While we pray to the Lord of the harvest about the opposition we may face, we must balance it with the compassion of Christ, who has the power to change even the wolves into humble and obedient sheep. Just think of how He changed Paul, the original persecutor of the church! While we remain alert, innocent, and shrewd among “the wolves,” we also pray fervently for their salvation. In sum, as we pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers, we must sign up to be one of them ourselves, and practice both compassion and sober-mindedness toward the lost as we go—even in unsafe territories.

🕒: *What fears stop you from advancing the gospel in your spheres of influence?*

🕒: *Have you ever faced “wolves” in your personal Christian witness? How do you engage with them? How do you pray for them?*

PRAY FOR GOD TO GIVE LABORERS WORDS

🕒 EPHESIANS 6:18–20

Q: How many times do you see the word “all” in verse 18? What is Paul teaching us about praying for those advancing the gospel?

Q: Why do you think Paul would ask to be given words to speak, though he is already an excellent speaker, theologian, and writer?

The apostle Paul, himself a wolf turned sheep, clearly believes in the power of prayer, especially as it relates to interceding for those who are advancing the gospel. He uses the word “all” four times in verse 18, showing us that prayer should permeate the entirety of a Christian’s life. It should be done at *all* times, with *all* supplication, in *all* perseverance, for *all* the saints. In addition to this general principle, Paul asks for a specific request for himself in verse 19, that the Ephesians would pray God would give him two specific things, *words* to speak and the *boldness* to speak them well.

First, Paul asks that the Ephesians pray fervently for God to give him the *words* to speak as he advances the gospel. It is evident that Paul believes God is the Lord of the harvest. When it comes to laborers who work in the fields of the lost world, Paul not only believes God provides the workers and sends them out, he also is persuaded that God will supply the tools they will need in their witness as well! Instead of asking the Ephesians to drum up eloquent speaking points for him, which would have given him an efficient and expedient solution, the apostle asks instead for them to beg *God* to give him the words to say. Paul knows that humans, no matter how talented or experienced they may be, can’t provide the type of words he needs to advance the gospel. Ultimately, only the Lord of the harvest can provide the verbal tools to evoke saving faith in the hearts of the lost.

What’s most striking is that Paul asks for all this while he’s in prison! He believes that through the prayers of the Ephesians, God will give him the right words to speak to the lost souls around him even within the walls of a jail cell. The Ephesians, as well as believers today, stand amazed at his request. He did not ask for comfort, protection from harm, or even freedom from his cell. Instead, all the apostle wants is life-changing words of the gospel to fall on the hearts of those around him.

As we pray for the advancement of the gospel, we too must fervently pray for God to give His global laborers the right words to say to unbelievers. After all, only *He* knows exactly what they need to hear. This is especially needed for those who face imprisonment for their faith. While we may be tempted to simply pray for their comfort or release, we should follow the example of Paul, praying even more so for God to give them the words of life to share with fellow prisoners.

Q: *Why do you think both words to speak the gospel and the boldness to speak them are needed in the witness of Christian?*

PRAY FOR GOD TO GRANT LABORERS BOLDNESS

■ ■ EPHESIANS 6:19–20

Q: *How many times do you see Paul mention boldness?*

Q: *How does it encourage you that a great apostle like Paul needed God to give him boldness in such harsh conditions?*

Next, Paul asks the Ephesians to pray not only for God to give him the words to speak, but the *boldness* to speak them. Again, Paul reveals that he believes God is truly Lord over his entire ministry among the lost. He knows God is the one raising up laborers, sending them out, giving them words, and even infusing them with divine boldness for the risky mission He has called them to! As he sits in chains, the apostle knows that boldness in the face of persecution and death is not something a Christian can just “muster up” on his own. It must be granted. He will not make it without God’s provision of strength in this time, so he begs the Ephesians to pray that God would grant it to him. After all, God could very well provide a believer with the perfect words to speak to the lost souls nearby, but without the confidence to speak them, the message will never come out due to fear! Paul wants the right message *and* the strength to declare it. Sharing the gospel deserves his best, and he wants to give it, with God’s divine help. This provides a valuable lesson to us as we pray for believers advancing the gospel around the world, that God would give them more than comfort or ease, but rather uncontainable boldness to continuing sharing the gospel, no matter where they may find themselves.

Q: *Why do you think it’s easy for American believers to replace the prayer for boldness with the prayer for comfort and relief?*

Q: *What fears hold you back from being confident to share the gospel? How often do you pray for boldness for yourself? For other believers?*

Again, we must not only pray for God to give global laborers words and boldness, but for God to provide these things for us as laborers too! Regarding our own personal ministries, our daily prayers must be filled with requests for God to give us the strength and the verbal tools we need to harvest the lost fields around us. As Ripken reminds us, it's important to pray for the suffering believers around the world, but in the end, "it's not enough. Instead of recognizing, thinking about, remembering, praying about, identifying with and focusing on the suffering of fellow believers around the world, we would do well to shift our focus. Quite simply, we would do well to ask ourselves whether or not we are being obedient to Jesus. He is asking us—He is expecting us—He is *commanding* us to share Him wherever we go. He is commanding us to do that wherever we are today. It is simply a matter of obedience. If He is our Lord, then we will obey Him. If we do not obey Him, then He is not our Lord." While we pray for God's global laborers to be equipped with the right message and the boldness to proclaim it, our own lives should show that we are pursuing the very same things in our own backyard. If not, we cannot truly call ourselves their co-laborers.

Q: *Would you consider yourself a true laborer in the fields of lostness around you? Or are you someone merely aware of the lostness, but not one who labors in word or in boldness to see unbelievers come to know the Lord? How can you start praying for the things you need to become a true laborer?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

Q: *How often do you pray for gospel laborers to be sent out in the world? Take some time to obey Jesus' command, and pray for God to raise up many laborers to proclaim the gospel throughout the world, including you.*

Q: *For laborers who are already working all over the globe, how can you pray for God to strengthen their witness as they advance the gospel? Allot substantial time this week to explore various organizations that, by their actions, boldly proclaim the gospel in the world, even amidst many oppositions or “wolves.” Use the following links to connect with these laborers so that your prayers will be better informed and you can support their work in practical ways:*

compassion.com • samaritanspurse.org • persecution.com • worldvision.org

Q: *Do you rely solely on your own personality, gifting, and confidence when sharing the gospel, or do you ask for God to give you the words and the boldness instead? How can you make asking God for these things a habit in your prayer life, and who can you ask to pray these things for you, just as Paul asked the Ephesians?*

Q: *Which part of advancing the gospel do you struggle to believe God is truly in control of? The raising up of laborers, though there seem to be few? The conversion of the lost? The ability for laborers to share the gospel clearly? The boldness required for oppressed Christians to continue in their witness? List some ways that your prayers can practically put God back on the throne of your life as “Lord of the harvest” from now on.*

PRAY

+ *Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week’s focus.*

- God, I pray that you would raise up more laborers for the spread of your saving message across the globe. Send them out with the right message and the boldness to speak it, no matter what.
- God, increase my belief that you are truly the Lord of the harvest, that as the gospel goes out, you are in control of every part of the process.

- God, bring persecuted believers to my mind on a daily basis, and lead me to pray constantly for them as they continue witnessing for you around the world.
- God, do not let me settle for simply praying for other laborers. Make me one as well. Equip me also to be sent out with words to speak and boldness to proclaim your name in my own daily mission fields.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 9:36–38 Jesus knows that in His earthly ministry, He can only personally encounter a small number of people, and that with many laborers, the vast number of unreached people groups can be met over time (John 14:12 follows the same logic). More proclaimers of the gospel are needed to spread the good news to unreached people groups in the world, and so Jesus tells his disciples to pray for God to “send out” more laborers. This particular phrase could also be translated as “thrust out,” and includes not only new laborers, but existing ones who “need to have a fire lit under them to thrust them out of their comforts and into the world of need” (F. D. Bruner, *The Christbook*).

LUKE 10:1–3 When Luke mentions that Jesus sends the disciples “ahead of him,” He is using the exact language that also speaks of John the Baptist’s mission. His point is clear. After the death of John the Baptist, the Twelve and the 72 took up the task of preparing the way for the Lord. Their mission was to prepare these villages for Jesus’ spiritual coming in the resurrection. The same is true for laborers today. As we share the gospel with those around us, we are giving them a chance to not only enter in relationship with Him, but to be prepared for His second coming. Also, the “harvest” mentioned should not be confused with the final harvest “on that day” in the future (Luke 10:12–15; Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43; Rev. 14:15–16). Instead, it refers to the present harvest of converts in the “now” time (John 4:35).

EPHESIANS 6:18–20 It’s important to note that the apostles’ requests for prayer are in context of spiritual warfare. He is clearly pointing out that prayer is one of the best weapons believers have against the “wolves” they will face, which, though they take human form sometimes, always have spiritual darkness at work behind them (Eph. 6:12). Also, prayer “in the Spirit” is a form of worship (John 4:23–24) enabled by the Spirit of God, who intercedes on behalf of the person who prays (Rom. 8:26–27).

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes and the New American Commentary Series (Matthew and Luke).*