

The Challenge to the Church in Chilling Times

by Roger Ellsworth

Roger Ellsworth's sermon calls for men to embrace their spiritual leadership roles and listen to God's message during challenging times.

Duration: 29:06

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 12:1-16, Ephesians 2:8-9

Topics: "Church"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of having hearts for God and His work. He relates the story of Peter's imprisonment and miraculous release to his own experience of being freed from sin and Satan. The speaker calls upon men to embrace their role as spiritual leaders and to prioritize the things of God and the church. He challenges the audience to examine the condition of their hearts and asks if they have zeal for God and His work.

Transcript

Please find Acts chapter 12 again, and the sermon this morning is based on these verses that I read a moment ago, the first sixteen verses of this twelfth chapter of the book of Acts. We've been working our way through this book of Acts. We began some months ago on Sunday evenings, and because I wanted to do a special series of messages on the Sunday evenings this summer, I decided a few Sundays ago to shift this book to Sunday mornings, and we have worked our way through the book until we now find ourselves here in this twelfth chapter.

And what a great, great portion of the word of God that this is. Now, I thought as I looked at this passage that this has unusual relevance for this particular occasion. Here we are gathered on Father's Day, and I just want to suggest to you men that there is a message here in these verses I read a while ago for men.

Now, there is a message here for everyone, so I certainly don't want the ladies to tune me out, but I think a message of unusual significance and a message of unusual relevance for men. All of you know, I think, that our society is in deep trouble these days, and the future looks very dark and foreboding. And I'm not sure that there has ever been a more difficult time in our country in the last several years than the time that we're facing right now.

It seems like that we have problems on every hand, and I have suggested to you very recently that we need to listen for the message of heaven in the mess that we have here on earth. Political leaders are

deeply concerned about the future of not only our nation, but the future of most of the leading nations of this world. And so, I do not think that I'm exaggerating when I talk about earth's mess.

But the danger is, ladies and gentlemen, that we will not listen for the message of heaven while we are grappling with all of these problems that we have. And there is a message from heaven. And in fact, I'll go so far as to say that the reason that we have all these difficult and trying circumstances these days is because we've not been paying attention to God.

Now, you can get by for a while without listening to God, but you can't get by forever. And I go so far as to say that I think that heaven is speaking very loudly, very clearly in the challenging circumstances of our day, and that if we want things to get better, we had better listen to heaven's message. We had better quit thumbing our noses in God's face, and we had better take seriously God's Word, and we better get back to those principles on which this nation was founded, and those things that made this nation great.

We've gotten away from these things. And I also want to say that I think that men have a function, a role of critical importance in listening to the message of heaven in these days. I just want to say, men, that God has put us in a strategic position.

And sadly enough, many men today are not living up to the position that God has appointed for them. They're not fulfilling their responsibilities. It's a day when many men are shrinkers and shirkers.

They shrink from leadership, and they shirk responsibility. And I do not expect our society to show dramatic improvement until men show dramatic improvement in their performance. And so I call upon men today to stop shrinking from leadership and stop shirking responsibility, and to embrace the role that God has given us, and be spiritual leaders in our families, and to give priority to the things of God, and give priority to the church of God.

Now, you may be saying, well, Pastor, what is there in this 12th chapter of the book of Acts that is a message of unusual importance for men? Let me share with you, in the time that we have, remaining three vital principles today. First of all, I want to tell you that it is crucial for men to have hearts for God and His work. It's crucial for men to have hearts for God and His work.

I see that emerging from this passage of Scripture. And then secondly, I would say it's crucial for men to be willing to count the cost and to pay the cost, if you please. If you have a heart for God and His work, there's going to be a cost.

There's going to be a price tag attached to having God and His work on your heart. And you need, sir, to be willing to pay the price, because there's definitely a price. And then thirdly, I'm glad that I can close with this today and simply say that it's also of critical importance for men to be great believers and great prayers.

Great believers and great prayers. Now, there are so many things here in these verses of Scripture that we could talk about. It'd be possible to do a whole series of messages just on these few verses.

There's so much here that we're going to have to leave untouched because of the constraints of time. And so here are things that are just lying on the surface, the things that I have said to you. And while I'm relating this passage to men in particular, I think that all of you can see that there is a message here for all of us.

And so let's look at each of these three points that I have shared with you. First of all, we need to have hearts for God and His work. Secondly, we need to be willing to pay the price for having hearts for God and His work.

And thirdly, we are called to be great believers and to be great prayers. Now, think with me about this first point. I'm calling upon our men and secondarily calling upon all of you to have hearts for God and His work.

Here we have another episode in the life of the early church. I can tell you something about the early Christians. I can tell you that they were just passionately, passionately in love with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Already, I feel rebuked. I hope that you feel rebuked because I think we all need to be rebuked at this point. I tell you, I encounter very few people who have the same passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ that these early Christians had.

What's wrong with us anyway? We say that God in grace has lifted us from sin and condemnation. We say that He has removed from us the sentence of eternal wrath. We say that we have been forgiven of our sins, adopted into the family of God, and given the right to eternal glory.

And it's all through the gospel of Jesus Christ. And yet there seems to be very little passion for the gospel today. Oh my, our hearts ought to break over this.

My heart should break that I have no more passion for the gospel than I have. Your heart should break over your lack of interest, your lack of zeal for the gospel. Now, the early church desired nothing more, brothers and sisters in Christ, than to simply have peace and quiet and to be allowed to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That's what they wanted. They wanted the warm, gentle breeze of freedom to blow so that they could go about the business of proclaiming the gospel. But their desire was not fulfilled.

They wanted the warm, gentle breeze of freedom, but there was a chill wind that blew from Herod's throne. And Herod, a very despicable, repugnant human being, in order to ingratiate himself to the Jews, decided that he would persecute the church of Jesus Christ. And so we read here that he has James executed.

And this is James, the brother of John. It's not James, the half-brother of Jesus, but it's James, the brother of John, one of the sons of Zebedee. You may remember about James when Jesus was engaged in his earthly ministry.

Do you remember James's mother coming up to Jesus and saying, Lord, I want to ask you to do me a favor whenever you come into your kingdom. I want one of my sons to sit on your right hand and the other on your left. Well, she was asking for special honor for her sons.

And one son here receives special honor because he lays down his life for the gospel of Jesus Christ. And there's a special honor to being a martyr for Christ. And James's mother did not realize when she made that request that that request would be granted, but not in a way that she would have chosen.

But here's this chill, chilly wind blowing from Herod's throne. The church desires freedom, but here is opposition. Here is persecution.

And Herod, seeing that the Jews who were opposed to Jesus and his followers, saying that they liked very much what he did with James, he had James executed. Herod, seeing that they liked that, took Peter and put him in prison. Now here's my question for you.

Why? Why was James executed? Why was Peter imprisoned? Of course, you'd be correct if you were to say, well, James was executed and Peter was in prison because this man, Herod, was a tyrant. He was an evil, evil man. And so he was.

But there's more to it than that. James was executed and Peter was in prison because these men had hearts for God. These men had occasion.

They had opportunity to stop all this preaching in the name of Jesus. They had opportunity to say, this is dangerous. I'm running a risk here by being so zealous for Jesus.

I'm going to call it off. I'm going to shut it down. I'm not going to push myself out there in the forefront as I have been doing.

Why didn't they do that? Why didn't they shut it down? Why didn't they call it off? The answer, my friends, is as plain as the noses on our faces. They could not because their hearts, their hearts would not let them, their hearts would not let them be anything except utterly zealous for the gospel of Jesus Christ. May I simply ask you today, where is your heart? Where is your heart? What's the condition of your heart? What's the condition of your heart for this church? Do you have zeal for God in your heart today? Do you have zeal for God's work? James and Peter had hearts for God and hearts for the work of God.

And I'm asking you, where's your heart today? Do you love God more than anything else? Do you love the gospel of Jesus Christ to a very great degree? Do you have a fervent love for it? Do you love this church and her ministry? James and Peter were doing all that they could to advance the kingdom of Christ. What are you doing? What are you doing today? And you may be saying, well, pastor, what are some things that I can do to advance the kingdom of Christ? I hope that you are asking because I want to tell you some things that you can do. Now, buckle your seatbelt and hang on tight.

One thing that you can do to advance the kingdom of Christ in this world is to faithfully attend the house of God. I'm so glad for our faithful attenders here at Parkview. There wouldn't be a Parkview without faithful attenders.

But we need more. And this is something that you can do. You can do this to advance the kingdom of Christ and to advance the cause of Christ.

And not only can you give, can you attend faithfully, but you can give generously. Give generously. Now, I know people don't like to hear that these days.

We don't like for preachers to talk about money. May I simply remind you that when Jesus was engaged in his earthly ministry, that he deliberately went to the temple on one occasion and he sat there where people were giving their money. And he deliberately observed people giving their money.

The Lord Jesus was interested in giving. And he still is interested. And by the way, the Bible tells us to give generously.

Give cheerfully. And this is another way that we can advance the kingdom. Now, some of you I know are saying, well, Pastor, you don't understand.

I've got all kinds of places for my money to go. And there's just not enough left. Well, my friends, just stop and think about what you're saying.

You're saying that the God who gives you the very air that you breathe, the God who gives you every blessing that you have, that God is not worthy of your financial gifts. What a terrible thing to say. Do we have hearts for God? A lot of us would say, oh, yes, I have a heart for God.

I have a heart for God's work. But our actions don't bear out what we profess to have. I'm just telling you ways that you can advance the kingdom of Christ.

And James and Peter were advancing the kingdom of Christ. And they did so because they had hearts for God. Hearts for his work.

You can be sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. It used to be common among people in our churches, wherever they went, to talk about the Lord Jesus. That doesn't seem to be very common anymore.

This is a day of political correctness. We're so afraid that we might offend somebody. We'd rather run the risk of letting them go to hell than offend them by sharing the gospel of Jesus.

The problem, my friend, is that our hearts are not where they ought to be. You know that to be the case, don't you? And you may find yourself getting a little upset. You might find yourself saying, well, I don't like this kind of preaching from this fellow.

And yet, if you will ask your heart, your heart will tell you that what I'm saying to you is true. That we don't have hearts for God and for his work to the degree that we should. Well, this, I say, is the explanation for James being executed and Peter being in prison.

These men had hearts for God that just would not, those hearts would not let them ease up. Those hearts would not let them shut it down. Those hearts drove them and compelled them to do more and more and more for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Where's your heart today? Now, there's a cost involved in all of this. As Simon, Peter, and James went about spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, they ran into opposition. And so it is today.

There's opposition to this business of living for God. You, you won't live for God very long until you'll find out that the people don't like it. And you might as well be prepared for that.

And so I'm talking about the second part of my sermon here. I'm talking about being willing to count the cost and being willing to pay the price. There is a price involved in having a heart for God.

There's a price involved in having a heart for God's work. And how few there are these days, it seems, who are willing to pay the price. Do you remember what the Apostle Paul said over there in 2nd Timothy chapter 3 and verse 12? He said, all who live godly in Christ Jesus, all who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

There have been mega shifts in this American society of ours since I began preaching years ago. I'm not going to even tell you how many years ago now, but there have been mega shifts. And one of the things that is so different today than when I began preaching is that there's a, you've noticed it haven't you, there's a hostility, a hostility in our society toward Christianity.

And you, you begin to demonstrate that you have a heart for God and God's work and you're going to run smack dab into that hostility. It's there. Well, you've noticed it haven't you? And don't misunderstand what I'm about to say.

I'm about to say that you cannot mistreat, speak ill of any minority group in America, but you can mistreat and speak ill of Bible-believing Christians. Now, I'm not saying that you should have anything derogatory to say about any group, but I'm saying that that same rule should apply to Bible-believing Christians. But we're constantly, constantly held up as objects of disdain and ridicule and scorn.

And there would be outrage in this society if any other group was treated the way that Bible-believing Christians are treated. But there's no outrage. No outrage.

And the same people who are constantly pushing, pushing, pushing political correctness in every other area of life suddenly have no stomach for it when it comes to extending the same privileges to Christians that they extend to others. What's all this about? Well, much to the chagrin of the people who are opposed to Christianity, let me just simply say that this proves Christianity, because the Bible has constantly said that you will be hated in this world. We need men today who have hearts for God, and we need men have hearts for God to such a degree that they're willing to pay the cost, they're willing to pay the price, they're willing to stand up against the opposition.

And then let me come here in closing to my third point. We need men today who will be great believers and great prayers. Now, there's a lack of belief here in this twelfth chapter.

Here, Peter is in prison, and here the church is praying for him, and God, in answer to the prayers of the church, sends his angel right there into the prison. And the angel causes the chains to fall off Peter, and he begins to lead Peter past the guards and right out the door, and the passage says that the door opened of its own accord. God is at work here in this situation.

By the way, I cannot read this passage and never can read it without just relating it, Peter's experience there to my own experience. There was a time when I was chained by sin and Satan. I was in Satan's prison and bound fast by the chains of sin.

But God in grace came into the prison, caused the shackles to fall off, and I went free. Oh, I tell you, if you're a Christian this morning, you must not fail to relate Peter's experience to your own experience in coming to Christ. Charles Wesley put it like this, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Fast bound in sin and nature's night, but thine eye diffused a quickening ray. My chains fell off, my heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

There's a miniature picture here in Peter's experience of the experience of every child of God. And so Peter's out of the prison now, and he doesn't quite know what to do. He has to collect himself.

He's confounded by this, and so he finally decides, well, I must go. I know where my brothers and sisters in Christ are praying. I must go there and tell them that their prayers have been answered.

And so he goes, and he knocks on the door, and Rhoda comes to the door, and she can't believe her eyes. Here the people are, they're praying for this very thing, for Peter to be released, and now he has been released. But they, she can't believe her eyes.

And so she goes, instead of just letting Peter in the door, she goes back to the group, leaving him standing there at the gate. And she says, you'll never guess who's standing out here at the gate. Well, who is it? It's none other than Peter.

And they said, well, you're crazy. They've been praying for this thing, but they're not willing to accept it. And they say to her, you're out of your mind.

And she says, no, no, I'm telling you the truth. He's really standing out there. And here we have a picture, I think, of the modern-day church so frequently, while we debate and debate and debate among ourselves.

The answer is standing at the door. The answer is standing at the door. I tell you, we debate things, and God has already provided the answer.

And we just need to embrace the answer that God has provided. Well, they finally determined that Simon Peter was there. But here's a lack of faith.

I'm saying to all of you today, listen, the degree of your blessing is directly attached to the degree of your belief. Did you get that? The degree of your blessing in the Christian life has a direct correlation, has a connection with the degree of your belief. And if you're not receiving much blessing in the Christian life, if you're not enjoying your Christianity, you might be inclined to blame it on the church, or blame it on the preacher.

Well, they just don't do this right, and they don't do that right, and they don't do the other, and I'm not pleased with this, and I'm not pleased with that. Could it be, my friend, that your lack of blessing is due to your lack of belief? I rather like the words that Charles Spurgeon was fond of saying. Charles Spurgeon used to say, listen, Charles Spurgeon used to say, brethren, be great believers.

Little faith will take your souls to heaven, but great faith will bring heaven to your souls. May I call upon you men today to be great believers? I'm calling upon you men. I know we're up against it in these days.

It's hard to be a Christian. It's hard to live for the Lord. Herod's around, and he's doing well, and he's at work, and he's got his prison, and he's got his soldiers, and he's got his chains.

But I'm calling upon you to believe, even when it seems that God is not at work, that he is at work, and that he will finally overcome Herod's soldiers, and his prison, and his chains. God will finally triumph over all. Can you believe that today? Be great believers, and be great prayers.

Isn't it interesting? Herod's got his prison, and he's got his chains, and he's got his soldiers, and over here's the church, and she's got prayer. And you ask most people to look at that situation and say, who's got the better of it? They'd say, well, Herod does. Look, he's got his prison, he's got his chains, he's got his soldiers, he's so strong, and all the church has is prayer.

But oh, never underestimate the importance of prayer. Sometimes we give ourselves away. We say, well, all we can do is pray, as if prayer is a very small thing.

Listen, don't ever make prayer a small thing. Make prayer, what the Bible makes it, a big thing. God works through the prayers of his people.

So I call upon you today, not only to be great believers, but also be great prayers. And God's people said, let's bow together for prayer.

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