When it comes to physical health, the vast majority of people agree that there are several things you should do to take care of your body. For example, most people agree that you should exercise regularly. Most people agree that you should eat more fruits and vegetables and fewer chips and cookies. Most people agree that you should eat in moderation. Most people agree that you should get at least 7 hours of sleep every night. Most people agree that you should avoid addictive substances.

But even though most people agree on the basics of good health, the truth is very few people are really dedicated to living out the basics of good health. What do you think it would look like if I were to ask for a show of hands this morning as to how many of us exercise regularly, eat healthy, eat in moderation, get enough sleep, and avoid addictive substances? Maybe I should… but that’s not the point today.

For the last several weeks, we’ve been in Acts 2:42-47. These verses are the description of what the early church was like. And even more than that, they’re also the description of what any healthy church at any time in history will look like. And the concepts in these verses aren’t unfamiliar to us. Most Christians and most churches agree that the characteristics described in these verses are extremely important for your spiritual health and for the health of the church.

But it seems to me that we sometimes have a tendency to treat our spiritual health the same way we treat our physical health. We agree about what’s important… we agree about what our spiritual values should be… but are we really devoted to living those things out?

I have a pastor friend who used to pay non-Christians to come to his church on a Sunday and take a look around and give him an honest assessment of what they saw. What do you think would happen if we did that? What if somebody came for a week and really snooped around and then gave us a list of the top seven things we’re devoted to? What would be on the list? What wouldn’t be on the list?

My prayer for us is that that list would look a whole lot like Acts 2:42-47. And my prayer is that, by God’s grace, we’ll keep looking more and more and more like Acts 2:42-47. That’s why we’re dedicating the next several months to this sermon series called *DNA*. We’re focusing on who we’re supposed to be as a church and who we’re supposed to be as followers of Jesus. And we’re asking God to take the truth of His Word and to teach us and shape us and form us into His people and into His church by the power of His Spirit.

And what we’ve seen over the past month is that the Bible teaches us that we have one great purpose for which we exist. We exist to glorify God. That is why we were created. We were created for God’s glory. The Bible also teaches that the way we glorify God is by making followers of Jesus. People come to know God and see God’s glory through Jesus Christ. So we glorify God by introducing people to Jesus and making followers of Jesus. The Bible also teaches what it means for us to be followers of Jesus. Followers of Jesus are people who love God, love people, and go into the world. And then finally, we’ve identified seven characteristics that further describe what we’ll look like if we love God, love people, and go into the world. We’ll be learners who are informed by God’s Word, pray-ers who are in conversation with God, worshippers who intimately praise God, givers who invest in God’s kingdom, relaters who intentionally connect with people, servers who are involved in ministry, and reproducers who introduce people to Jesus. Those are our values. They’re the seven strands that make up our DNA as followers of Jesus. And for the past two weeks we focused on what it means to be a learner who’s informed by God’s Word. This week we’re focusing on to the next characteristic: pray-ers who are in conversation with God.

You can see this characteristic at the end of Acts 2:42. Acts 2:42 says, *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”* They devoted themselves… to prayer.

Now remember, Acts 2 is describing for us the very first days of the church. This is right after Jesus sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Spirit filled Jesus’ disciples and Peter began to preach the gospel, and 3000 people trusted Jesus and repented and were saved that day. Jesus was building His church by the power of His Spirit. And immediately after that, we come to this description of the church in Acts 2:42-47. When Jesus poured out His Spirit and began to build His church, this is what His people looked like. And one of the characteristics of these Spirit-filled followers of Jesus is that they devoted themselves to prayer. They *devoted* themselves to prayer. You may remember from last week that the word devoted means to attach to or hold on to or be faithful to. When the Spirit filled the early church, these followers of Jesus grabbed hold of prayer and it became part of who they were. They didn’t just pray over their meals. They didn’t just repeat a few words in a religious service. They didn’t just rehearse their nightly monologue before they went to sleep. No. Prayer was so much more than that for them. They devoted themselves to prayer. They grabbed hold of prayer. These people really prayed. They didn’t just have a prayer life. Prayer was their life.

And my prayer for us is that the same will be true of us. I pray that Jesus will pour out His Spirit on this church, and He will keep building His church, and we will be devoted to prayer the way the early church was. So what I want us to do this morning is I want us to look at the first example of prayer recorded in the Bible after the church was formed. I want us to study their prayer and see what it means for us to be people who are devoted to prayer.

The actual prayer comes near the end of Acts chapter 4, but it will be helpful for us to walk through the story of what happens between chapter 2 and chapter 4. At the end of chapter 2, Luke gives us the description of the early church that we’ve been focused on for several weeks. They were devoted to the apostles’ teaching. They fellowshipped together. They prayed together. They worshipped together. They gave generously to anyone who was in need. And God kept saving people and the church kept growing. And Acts 2:46 tells us they met together in the temple courts every day. That would have been the best place in Jerusalem for a really big group of people to get together so the apostles could teach them. And at the beginning of chapter 3, Luke tells us that one day Peter and John are headed into the temple, probably to teach some of the Christians who are gathered there. And a crippled man outside the temple asks them for money. Peter answers the man with what has become a very famous verse. In Acts 3:6 Peter says, *“Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”* And Peter heals the man in the name of Jesus. And verse 8 says the man doesn’t just start walking. He goes jumping into the temple, praising God. And everyone in the temple sees him and they recognize him as the crippled beggar who used to sit outside the temple, and they’re amazed that he’s been healed. So this crowd begins to gather around Peter and John to find out what’s going on. And Peter’s more than happy to tell them. He starts preaching the gospel to the crowd right in the middle of the temple. In Acts 3:12 he says, *“Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see. Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christwould suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord…”*

Peter doesn’t pull any punches. He tells them of their guilt in crucifying Jesus, and he calls them to repent and be saved. That brings us to Acts 4. In Acts 4, while Peter and John are still speaking to the people, the temple guard and some Jewish religious leaders interrupt them and arrest them and have them thrown in jail for teaching about Jesus’ resurrection. And even though they didn’t get to finish the sermon or have an invitation or schedule a revival, Acts 4:4 tells us many people put their faith in Jesus and were saved. In fact, at this point, there were over 5000 men in the church, which means if you include women and children, the church had probably grown to over 20,000 members. Jesus is building His church.

Well, the next day Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin, which was sort of like the Jewish Supreme Court. And the Sanhedrin starts to question Peter and John about the miracle they had performed and what they had to say for themselves. Their answer is so great that we have to read it. It starts in verse 8, and as we read this, remember that Peter and John are on trial. They may go to prison. They could even be executed for what they say. Verse 8, *“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: ‘Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.’”*

Not exactly a politically correct response when you’re standing before the Jewish Supreme Court. Peter basically says, “Are we really on trial for being kind to a crippled man and healing him? Well, if that’s the case, then let me make sure you know the whole story. He was healed in the name of Jesus Christ. And yes, that’s the same Jesus you crucified. You rejected Him. But guess what? God raised Him from the dead, and Jesus has become the capstone. He’s become the chief cornerstone on which God is building His people. And salvation can be found in no one else but Jesus and Jesus alone.” That’s Peter’s defense. He preaches the gospel of Jesus to the very Jewish leaders who had Jesus crucified. And Peter’s boldness stuns the Sanhedrin. Look at verse 13, *“When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus.”* Isn’t that a great phrase? “They’ve been with Jesus. There’s something different about these two. We can’t bully them and intimidate them. They’ve been with Jesus. They’ve seen something… they know something… and Jesus has had an effect on them that we can’t touch. They’ve been with Jesus.” Church, I pray that’s what people sense when they come into this church and into our lives. I pray that there’s something different about us, because we’ve been with Jesus.

Let’s keep going. Verse 14, *“But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.”* That verse makes me laugh. The Sanhedrin doesn’t like what’s going on, but even they can’t deny the evidence that’s right in front of them. The man really is healed, and there’s not a whole lot they can say about it. Verse 15, *“So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. ‘What are we going to do with these men?’ they asked. ‘Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name.’”* You see, the Jewish leaders aren’t too happy to have Peter and John preaching about Jesus. They thought they’d already taken care of that Jesus problem several weeks ago when they had Him crucified. Now here’s that name again. People preaching the resurrection of Jesus. People preaching salvation in the name of Jesus. People getting healed in the name of Jesus. They just can’t get away from the name of Jesus. So what does the Sanhedrin do? Verse 18, *“Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”* They tell Peter and John, “Don’t even say the name Jesus.” Peter and John give them another great answer in verse 19, *“Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”* Peter and John say, “We know what you did. You crucified Jesus. We know what God did. God raised Him from the dead. Who do you really think we should obey? You or God? We can’t stop talking about Jesus. We saw His life. We heard His teaching. We saw Him crucified. We saw Him resurrected. And we will proclaim Jesus until the day we die!”

Of course, that’s not the response the Sanhedrin was looking for. So in verse 21 they continue to threaten Peter and John. But they let them go, because all the people who saw them heal the crippled man are praising God, and the people would probably revolt if they punish Peter and John for healing the man.

As soon as the Sanhedrin releases Peter and John, they go straight back to the church and they tell the church about the Sanhedrin’s threats. And I hope you realize how serious these threats really are. The members of the Sanhedrin were the most powerful leaders in all of Israel. And these leaders were the ones who had Jesus crucified just a few weeks earlier. Peter and John and the early church know that if they ignore the Sanhedrin and keep preaching about Jesus, there’s a very good chance the Sanhedrin will do the exact same thing to them that they did to Jesus. Peter and John and the early church know that if they continue to preach Jesus, it may cost them their lives.

So what do they do? How does the early church react? Do they appoint a committee to deliberate for six months about how to respond? Do they put together a new strategic plan on how to share the gospel without getting in trouble with the Sanhedrin? Do they call in a consultant and pay him for creative ideas on how to grow a church in a hostile culture? Do they get discouraged and say, “Oh well, the world’s just too wicked. Forget about them. At least we got the gospel. We’ll just stay in our nice safe holy huddle”? No! They pray! They pray. Look at verse 24, *“When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. ‘Sovereign Lord,’ they said, ‘you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.” Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the peopleof Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’*

*“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”*

The early church was devoted to prayer. So when difficulty came, they prayed. When decisions had to be made, they prayed. When they needed strength, they prayed. When they needed boldness, they prayed. When they faced persecution, they prayed. When they needed to see the spiritual power of the gospel triumph over the political and religious agenda of Israel, they prayed. They were devoted to prayer.

And as we look at their prayer, it teaches us three great truths about why we need to be devoted to prayer, as well. The first reason you should be devoted to prayer is because of who God is. Start in verse 24 with me and let’s look at the foundation of their prayer. They pray, *“Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.”* “You are Creator God. You’re the Source of everything. Everything comes from you and everything is in your hands. You are sovereign. You are in control. So we’re coming to you, because where else would we go? We’re praying because we know who you are.” Verse 25, *“You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: ‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.’* “You said in advance that this would happen. This didn’t catch you off guard. 1000 years ago the Holy Spirit told David that the kings of the earth would stand against you and your Messiah, your Anointed One, the Christ. And David wrote it down for us in the psalms, so we know this didn’t catch you off guard. You’ve seen it for all eternity, and you told us it would happen, and now it’s happened just like you said.” Verse 27, *“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the peopleof Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”* Wow. That is a big view of God. “God, it’s not just that you saw this. It’s not just that you knew it would happen. You decided it should happen. You’re the One in control. They carried out their wicked schemes, and even then that didn’t thwart your plans. They killed your Messiah, and it serves your purposes! You are the Sovereign God, and because of who you are, we trust you, and we come to you in desperate prayer. God, you have to do this. You’re able to do this. We know who you are. We’ve seen who you are in Jesus. And so we pray to you.”

And Church, I want to ask you, “Do you know God that way?” Do you know who God is the way the early church knew who God is? Do you recognize that God is in control… that He is sovereign? God wasn’t out of control when Jesus was crucified. It didn’t catch Him off guard. He didn’t have to come in and clean up a mess that He didn’t intend. No! It was for His purposes that Jesus was crucified. He had planned this before the foundation of the world. He was accomplishing His purpose of grace and redemption through the death of His Son. And God is so strong and He is so big and He is so sovereign that even when wicked men committed the worst evil and the most atrocious sin of all time and crucified the King of Glory… even then, they were only doing what God’s power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Even wicked men are pawns in the hand of our holy and righteous and sovereign God!

Do you know God that way? Have you learned to rest in His sovereignty? Do you find hope and peace and joy in the fact that God is in control? Maybe the reason we don’t pray the way we should… maybe the reason we aren’t as devoted to prayer as we should be… is because we don’t know who God is the way we should. God is the Sovereign Lord over all that exists, and He is accomplishing all His purposes. And that is why we should be devoted to prayer. That’s why we can pray with such confidence. When you pray, you’re talking to the One who’s able to do something.

I remember one time when I was playing football in high school, we were having trouble scoring on offense. And as the game went on, I started to see some plays that might work against the defense. So you know what I didn’t do? I didn’t tell one of our linemen. I didn’t tell the referee. I didn’t tell the cheerleaders. I told the head coach. Because he was the one calling the plays. He was actually able to do something, so it made sense to talk to him.

100,000 times more, it makes sense to talk to God… because of who God is. God is wise, so He knows what’s best for you. God is love, so He wants what’s best for you. And God is sovereign, so He’s able to do what’s best for you. When you pray to God, you’re praying to the One who knows what’s best, wants what’s best, and is able to do what’s best. And that means, when you know who God is, you can know that whatever may come in your life, things are not hopeless. They’re not pointless. It may feel that way to you. You may not have any idea how in the world you’re going to move forward. But that’s okay. You don’t have to know. You’re not God. God is God, and God knows. You just pray, and you trust God, because if God can redeem the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, He can certainly redeem all the suffering and pain in your life. So when the Sanhedrin’s breathing down your neck, when the doctor says, “It’s cancer,” when you can’t get pregnant or your wife miscarries, when the business falls apart or you lose your house, when your spouse dies or your children leave home or a parent betrays you, you can turn to God and say, “God, you know. You are the Sovereign Lord, and for all eternity, you’ve known the pain of watching your Son die on the cross. So I know I can trust you with my pain. You are in control. Take this and redeem it for your purposes and for your glory. I rest in you.”

It makes sense to talk to God… because of who God is. God is wise. God is love. God is sovereign. He knows what’s best for you. He wants what’s best for you. And He’s able to do what’s best for you. So you’ll be devoted to prayer when you realize who God is.

The second reason you should be devoted to prayer is because of how much you need God. In a sense, this is the natural outworking of #1. The more you realize who God is, the more you realize who you are. The more you see how big God is, the more you see how small you are. The more you see how sufficient and sovereign and in control God is, the more you see how dependent and needy and out of control you are. And you realize you can’t handle the things in your life, and you need God. So you pray. You’re devoted to prayer.

That’s exactly what happened to the early church. The Sanhedrin was threatening their very lives. And they knew those threats were real. They knew the Sanhedrin could kill them, and they didn’t have the power to do anything about it. But look what it did for them. It reminded them of just how much they needed God. The threats, the persecution, their weakness, their neediness drove them to the One who is not weak… to the One who is not needy. It drove them to Almighty God. Their need for God pressed them into His presence. In a very real way, the essence of prayer, the heart of prayer, is always: “God, I need you… because of who you are… I need you… because of who I am… I need you. God, I need you.”

Most of you know that Christy and I don’t have children yet, but we do have a dog that we treat way too much like a child, Annie. And Annie loves to go for walks, but every now and then she’ll get a thorn or a briar stuck up in her paw. She’ll yelp and pick that paw up, and you know what she does? She’s comes running on three legs straight to me. She’s hurting and she needs help and she knows I’ll help her. Listen to me, you are 100 times needier than Annie with a thorn in her paw, and God is 100 million times bigger and stronger and better and more loving and gracious and good to help you than I am with Annie. You should be devoted to prayer because of how much you need God.

And once again, I wonder if part of the reason we aren’t as devoted to prayer as we should be is because we don’t live with a constant awareness of just how desperately we need God. How many of us live our lives like what we really need is health or a good job or more money or a boyfriend or a girlfriend or the right spouse or popularity or a bigger house and a nicer car and satellite TV and a new phone and our favorite sports team to win? And maybe all that stuff is like spiritual Novocain and it numbs our souls to the fact that our real and most pressing need is God Himself.

And I want to suggest something very unpopular right now: It is the gracious work of God when things threaten our health and our jobs and our finances and our co-dependent relationships and our possessions, because God’s trying to wake us up from the numbing effect that those things can have on our souls. God graciously does that to remind us of our neediness and to press us to Himself in prayer.

So maybe you’re here this morning, and you’re living with the threat that your marriage is falling apart. Or you’re living with the threat that your children will continue to rebel against God. Or you’re living with the threat that the cancer will spread. Or you’re living with the threat that your income won’t cover your bills. Whatever threat it is that’s real in your life, let it drive you to God in prayer. Let it remind you of your neediness and your dependence on God. Run to God in prayer. You’ll be devoted to prayer when you realize just how much you need God.

Finally, the third reason you should be devoted to prayer is so the name of Jesus will be exalted. Look at verses 29-30, *“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”*

Do you see the heart of their request in verse 30? Their prayer is that everything will be done in the name of Jesus. You may not have thought about it yet, but do you realize they never ask for protection? They don’t ask for safety. They don’t even ask for their lives to be spared. They ask for boldness to proclaim the name of Jesus. They ask God to give them the courage to preach the very name that may bring their death. “God, you know their threats. You know they’ll kill us for preaching Jesus. Now give us the courage to preach Jesus.”

Their prayer reveals what they value most. They value Jesus more than anything else. They want the name of Jesus to be exalted more than they want safety or security or comfort or an easy life. In fact, if persecution is the price they have to pay for preaching Jesus, then so be it, because persecution is worth it if Jesus is exalted.

As far as I can tell, the early church didn’t suffer from the delusion that so many of us suffer from. The delusion I’m talking about is the delusion that prayer is for us and about us. Listen, we’re not the center of the universe, and God is not some cosmic vending machine orbiting around us, waiting for us to pull His lever every time we want something. God is the Sovereign Lord who has chosen to exalt the name of Jesus above every other name. And prayer brings us into His orbit, so that we’re centered on Him, and we join Him in His great purpose of exalting Jesus Christ.

Now yes, absolutely, you can come to God and ask Him for what you need. You can even ask Him for what you want. God is a good God and a loving Father who loves to give you good gifts. But the purpose of all those gifts is that you’ll get the greatest gift of all: The name of Jesus will be exalted in your life and you will know Jesus as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The early church knew that was the reason for prayer. They wanted Jesus to be exalted. They lived for that. They prayed for that. They were devoted to prayer so that Jesus would be exalted.

What about you? How would your prayers change if the heart of every prayer was for Jesus to be exalted? What if every prayer request you ever uttered was throbbing with the desire for Jesus to be exalted? What if every time you asked God for something, your deepest motive… the burning passion of your soul… was for Jesus to be exalted? What if we spent as much time praying for Jesus to be exalted as we do praying for good health and travel safety? How would that change the way you pray? How would that change the way you live? How would that change our church and our community? How would God respond to prayers like that? Look at verse 31, *“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”*

When your deepest prayer is for Jesus to be exalted, God is pleased to answer your prayer, because your heart’s now in line with God’s heart. When your deepest prayer is for Jesus to be exalted, God pours out His Spirit in response to your prayer. God says, “You want my Son to be exalted? So do I. And that’s a spiritual work. So I’ll give you all the spiritual resources you’ll ever need. In fact, I’ll give you myself. I’ll fill you with my Spirit, and I’ll empower you to speak my Word, and I’ll exalt my Son through you.”

You’ll be devoted to prayer when your deepest desire is for the name of Jesus to be exalted.

When Jesus sent His Spirit and built His church, that is how His people prayed. They were devoted to prayer. They grabbed hold of it and it became part of them. And I pray the same will be true of us. I pray that we will be devoted to prayer the way that followers of Jesus should be devoted to prayer. I pray that we will be devoted to prayer, because we know who God is. God is sovereign. God is in control, so we pray to Him. I pray we’ll be devoted to prayer, because we know how much we need God. We are desperate and needy for God to do the work that only God can do, so we pray to Him. And I pray that we’ll be devoted to prayer, because we desire for Jesus to be exalted. And we know that work is way too great for us. So we pray, “God, make Jesus great in this place. May Jesus be exalted in His church. May Jesus be exalted in His people. May Jesus be exalted in us.”