

The Church That Thrives

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 2, beginning in verse 42, would you please stand with me as we honor the reading! Acts chapter 2, verse 42 through 47.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need, and day by day attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes. They received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number, day by day, those who were being saved. May God add a blessing to the reading this word. Would you please be seated? I hate when things break, especially when it's something that you use a lot and is expensive to fix. I'm talking about cars, washers and dryers, refrigerators, air conditioners, furnaces, lawn mowers, computers, ceiling fans, smartphones, televisions.

Thankfully, through the power of YouTube, I've been able to fix a number of those things on my own. I'm also thankful, though, for the truth of God's Word that you can't lose your salvation, because if that was so many times trying to fix those things, I would have lost it.

But you know, some of you, some of you like the challenge of fixing things. You like digging into the guts of an engine or the electrical components of an appliance, and you have one of those minds that you can look and you see how it all fits together, and there you can identify what it is that's not working right. Well, I do not have one of those minds. When I open the hood or look in at those electrical things, I just see a mess of stuff, and I wonder how in the world does any of this stuff actually work?

And I'm thankful for the men in this church who I've called and had come over to my house and fix a number of those things, and I think we're probably at the point where some of you, if you get a call from me, you know that Pastor Mike must have something broken at his house.

[3 : 05] But you know, I think for many of us, at least I know it's true for me, when something breaks, my first thought is just to replace it with something new.

Getting new things is exciting, isn't it? Especially when it's a new car. If you've got a new car, it's exciting to drive out of the car dealership and that new automobile instead of driving out with that same old thing you've been driving for years with dents and dings and stains on the floor mats and grime that is gathered in cup holders and beneath the seats. And you know, few things smell better than the aroma of climbing into a new car or maybe a new house. I'm sure it's gratifying to walk into a home with all brand new things instead of moving into an old fixer-upper with a long list of honeydew items that need to be fixed and replaced. But you know, even though I hate it when things break and I don't like fixing them when they do, I do enjoy watching old things being restored. I like watching those restoration shows. It's amazing to see how people are able to take something that most of us would think is destined for the garbage pile and they're able to restore it to its original working condition. You know, for many people, that's their career. Their job is to fix things when they break. And those restoration shows and those people who fix broken things, they remind me of Jesus because he's the ultimate restorer of broken things, isn't he?

Who in salvation makes old things new, who brings new spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead.

That work of restoration is a work that only he is able to do, grafting dead branches into his life-giving vine, connecting them permanently and eternally to his body and to the other members of his church.

[5 : 25] But as Scripture informs us, though the members of his body, his church, have been redeemed and restored to right relationship with God through him, our sin nature remains and it will remain until he returns and we undergo that final step in sanctification when we are glorified by him and we receive our resurrected bodies and then our sin nature will be totally, eternally done away with. And though we who are in Christ are undergoing that process of sanctification and are progressively being made more like Jesus through it, again, the sin nature remains. And it often causes problems in our churches, problems that need to be fixed. Because, you know, no church this side of heaven is perfect. No person this side of heaven is perfect. There are and there will be problems in the church. And all you have to do is read the Bible to see that that has always been the case. If you read the New Testament epistles, which are written to churches, often you'll read in them problems that are being addressed, that are, you know, seeking to be fixed.

There's issues over doctrine. There were issues that caused divisions. There were power struggles. There were issues with immorality. In fact, Revelation chapters 2 and 3 open with our resurrected Lord sending messages that he gives to John to send to seven churches that are in Asia Minor. Many of them had major issues. And Jesus was commanding them to address those issues. He gave them the prescription for their malady and a warning as well that if they did not take it, they would face his discipline and potentially have their lampstand removed. They would no longer be a church that he would work in and that he would work through. And so here's my point. My goal for this church is that it's still here when the Lord returns. A city on a hill, a lampstand that has not been removed. And now I realize that that goal is outside of our complete control, especially if the Lord doesn't return for another 50 years or so, if that's the case, this church will then be led by people who today are either babies or children or who haven't been born yet. My hope is that when that time comes, should that time come, we have left them with a healthy and a thriving church as a result of our being good stewards with the responsibility and the time that the Lord was gracious to give to us in the present, trusting us with this, his church. Again, no church is perfect, but the church that survives is the church that thrives as a result of its pursuing what the Lord has called it to be and what the Lord has called it to do. And when there are issues, when the church looks broken or is in a state of decline, we must remember that the Lord, Jesus Christ, loves his church. The Lord loves to restore his church when things aren't going as they should. And he equips his church through his word to thrive for him in his glory. I think that the five-year mark, now being here five years as your senior pastor, is always a great time to reflect over what has happened, what is happening, and where it looks like things are headed. And so as I've thought about that this week and reflected over those these past five years, the Lord led me to this passage in Acts chapter 2 verses 42 through 47. And these six verses describe the very first church of Jesus Christ. As we've read, it was a thriving congregation. These verses tell us tell us what causes a church to thrive. And I'll tell you honestly, I'm not just saying this,

I am more excited for our church and its future now than I've ever been. And I've been excited before. And I'm anticipating that God is going to do great things. And I'm anticipating that in doing so, our church will thrive and our church will excel still more. But the features and the characteristics that this first church possessed will be the things that we must seek and pursue, the things that we must feature and that characterize us. So the main idea for this morning's sermon is this, the church that survives is the church that thrives. Church that survives is the church that thrives.

And so in these six verses, there are three characteristics that described this church and what caused it to thrive. The first characteristic is this, the church that thrives is devoted to Jesus. Jesus. The church that thrives is devoted to Jesus. At the beginning of this passage, Luke says, they. He says, they. Who are they? Well, at the beginning of verse 42, we see that that they refers to verse 41, and the 3,000 people who were saved after they heard Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, preached the gospel to them on the day of Pentecost. So first of all, we see that the church that thrives consists of those who are devoted to Christ. In other words, it is Christians who make up the church.

[11 : 35] This is why we require an interview for church membership. It gives me an opportunity to visit and to know prospective members, to hear their testimony about how the Lord has saved them.

But we understand that the church is primarily for Christians. That doesn't mean that unbelievers are unwelcome. Far from it. It's our mission, isn't it? To go and to make disciples. And when unbelievers come into our church, that makes our mission a lot easier, doesn't it? But the goal isn't to draw a crowd, but to encourage others to live their lives for Christ. To pursue holiness and

righteousness. And only those who profess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior possess that desire to live their lives devoted to Him. Next in verse 42, it says that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. And so here we see that God designed His church to be a place where His Word is proclaimed and His Word is explained. The New Testament is replete with mandates to preach God's

Word and to teach God's Word so that God's people will know God's Word and His church will be guided by His Word and its instruction. Paul, an experienced at this point man in ministry, pastor, apostle, instructs Timothy, who is a young man, a young pastor, to devote himself to preaching and to explaining the importance of God's Word. And he explains why that's so important in 2 Timothy 4, 1 through 4.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing in His kingdom, preach the Word. Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.

Again, in 2 Timothy 2, verse 15, he gives them this instruction. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth. [14:03] You know, when I was choosing an emphasis for my doctorate, that choice was easy for me, expository preaching. And I chose it because of my strong conviction that the Bible is God's Word, that the Bible is inspired, and it is inerrant. It was God who created all things by His Word. It was Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who became flesh to save us from our sins. It was God's Word here in Acts chapter 2 that gave birth to His church as He used the Holy Spirit to illumine Peter to preach the gospel. And as a result of God's Word being preached, 3,000 people were saved in one day.

God uses His Word to save. God uses His Word to establish and guide and strengthen and encourage His people. There is no substitute for the Word of God. Nothing can accomplish what only God can accomplish through His Word as it works in and through the lives of His people in His church.

And that's what this early church devoted themselves to. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Teaching, teaching which is now written in the pages of the New Testament, which continue to supply the church today with all it needs to grow and to be healthy and to thrive. 1 Peter 2, 2-3, Peter gives them that encouragement.

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up in your salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. So you see, Scripture is food for believers. It causes them to grow. It's the power at work in their lives in conjunction with the Holy Spirit. And there is no alternative for that. If the church trusts more in their opinions than it. If it ignores or twists its instruction to appeal to popular opinion. If greater emphasis is placed on the production of Sunday morning service to manipulate people's emotions instead of the proclamation of God's Word. If the teaching and preaching of God's Word is just a data dump of information, a bunch of explanation without any kind of application, then such a church is in peril and will be paralyzed for its lack of devotion to God's Word.

As God has warned His people in His Word. Take, for example, Hosea. In Hosea 4-6, the Lord there declares, my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Where does that knowledge come from?

[16:51] His Word. Because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your children. You see, the church cannot operate on truths that the Bible does not teach. Believers cannot function on principles that they have not learned. Thriving churches are devoted to the disseminating of biblical truth for all ages in its congregation. Thriving churches are devoted to the Word. They are also devoted to fellowship.

Next, in verse 42, they're described as being devoted to the fellowship. Their fellowship in the Greek is *koinonia*. And that means partnership. It means sharing. At my previous church, we had a location downstairs. And that's where all the coffee was and where all the donuts were. And we called that *koinonia*. And people would go, obviously, for their coffee and their donuts.

And they would exchange some pleasantries to one another. How are you? How's your week been? And that's great. And certainly, I'm one of those people who I need my caffeine in the morning in order to operate well, right? And sugar goes along great with caffeine. But if that's as deep as our fellowship goes with one another, just saying, hey, good morning, how are you? And then we head off into our different directions. That's not koinonia. God has called us to be more than acquaintances.

Those who receive Christ have been permanently joined to Him and with all other believers whom He has saved. So understand that we are going to spend a long time together and eternity together. We are a family. We are a family. And God calls us to be devoted to one another in a way that goes much deeper than merely being acquaintances. The Bible does not envision the Christian life as one that is lived apart from other believers. We need each other. We need each other for encouragement.

[19 : 13] A church devoted to fellowship is a church where none of its members are ever treated as if they were strangers. Where no one shows up anonymously and leaves anonymously. A church devoted to fellowship is a church that seeks to be present and active in one another's lives. They see the necessity of gathering together collectively Sunday after Sunday to worship the Lord, and they make that a top priority.

As Hebrews 10, 24 through 25 says, You know, in a little bit, we will be dismissed to the fellowship hall for a meal. And I encourage you to apply this teaching right over there. You know, so often we are in the habit of sitting with people who we know well already. And some of us, like me, if you tend to be more introverted, you're all right sitting in a table all by yourself. But don't do that. Go in there and look for people that you haven't had a chance to really develop koinonia with. Sit with them. Talk with them. Interact with them.

Get to know your family. That's what thriving churches do. Thriving churches are also devoted to being Christ-centered. It says that they were devoted to the breaking of bread. And that is a reference to the celebration of the Lord's Supper or communion. A time when we reflect upon what we all share in common despite our differences. Our differences in race, our differences in gender, or our socioeconomic status, or whether or not you support OU or OSU, or for those of you who know better, KU. Right, Michael? Amen. But communion reminds us that we are all sinners saved by grace.

It reminds us that we all meet on common ground. And that common ground is the foot of the cross. And we acknowledge when we take communion together the gracious work of God to save us, to unite us, and to continually have a need for Him to keep us together, to confess our sins, and put an end to whatever divisions we've allowed sin to create in our fellowship. Communion gives us an opportunity to reflect over those things. Churches that thrive are devoted to being Christ-centered as expressed in their devotion to remember the sacrifice that Christ made for them on the cross. Churches that thrive are also devoted to prayers. We continue on in verse 42. It says, and they devoted themselves to the prayers. But you know, unfortunately, prayer is something that we often neglect in the church. God uses prayer, though. He uses prayer to change us. Prayer humbles us as we acknowledge that we need our Lord and His help. Prayer changes the way that we also see one another. You know, if you're angry or you're at odds with somebody in your church and you pray for them, it's hard to stay angry at them and see them as an enemy of yours instead of a brother or sister in Christ. Prayer is important for the church. Charles Spurgeon, the 19th century English preacher, was known as the Prince of Preachers. He was a man who spoke to thousands and thousands of people. He was a man whom the Lord used in mighty, mighty ways. And his church met in a massive building with a massive sanctuary and so a lot of people wanted to know what was his secret, especially young pastors. And so one day the story is told that some young men came to visit Spurgeon and they wanted to know sort of what was the, what was it behind his ministry? Why was it so effective? And so he told them, well, I want to take you down to the boiler room. Now the boiler room back then, because things ran on steam and still today is down in the basement and it's dirty and it's stinky and it's dingy. And Spurgeon took these young men down into the boiler room and opened up the door down in the basement and there in this room were hundreds of people praying for him and his ministry and his church. And he said, that's it.

[23 : 57] That's the key, is that my people pray for me. My people pray for our church. A church devoted to prayer will thrive when its devotion is to Jesus and committing to do things the way that he has commanded us to do them. And if they do, they will possess the next feature of a thriving

church.

The church that thrives reflects the character of Jesus. The church that thrives, the church that's devoted to him, devoted to all of these things mentioned in verse 42, will reflect the character of Jesus. In verse 43 it says, an awe came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. A church that thrives reflects the awesome character of Jesus. Awe is phobos in the Greek and that refers to fear or holy terror. You know, when a giant spider is crawling on you, for some of you that's terrifying, for other of you it's like, oh neat, a spider, I love insects, right?

But you're afraid. It's fear. It describes the feeling produced when a person also is seeing God at work, doing amazing things. The devotion of this church to Jesus was so genuine that both inside of the church and outside of the church, people knew that God was at work there. There's a very large church in Overland Park, Kansas, close to where I grew up and lived. And not long ago, they built a new sanctuary and as part of that sanctuary, they put in a stained glass window. Now the stained glass window alone cost 3.4 million dollars. 3.4 million dollars. And while I do think it's important that we maintain the building that our church meets in, and for those of you who are visiting, you've seen that wing over there.

It's an interesting story. We had a compressed natural gas tank torpedo into our church. We're working on it. We're getting it fixed. We're meeting with the insurance. But all that to say that, you know, we should take care of our grounds and make them look nice. But we are not looking to our building to being the thing or a window in our church to being the thing that draws people to us. Brick and mortar do not cause the church to be awesome. The awe that this church experienced was a result of what they knew and what they believed only God could do. In this church, God accompanied the preaching of the apostles with miracles.

[26 : 59] The purpose of those miracles was the same for when Jesus performed miracles. That was to confirm that what had been said before, what was being said afterward, were true. They were being confirmed in this miracle by God, that this person who spoke is a messenger of God. But I do believe, with the passing of the apostolic age and the completion of Scripture, there's no longer need for such signs to confirm those who speak for God. Why? Because now we have the Bible completed.

And you know if somebody speaks for God or not, based upon whether or not what they say matches with what is in here. But I do believe that God still performs miracles.

In fact, we've had many of you who've been sick and we've brought you here, we've met in here and we've prayed for you and we've laid hands on you and we've seen God heal many.

But the greatest miracle that God performs today is when He transforms a rebellious sinner into a child of His.

We see the miracle of a life being transformed through knowing Christ as their Lord and Savior. A thriving church is a church then where the waters of baptism are continually being stirred as a result of their devotion to Christ and their commitment to fulfill His commandment to go and to make disciples and to teach them.

[28 : 49] You know, one of the saddest things that I've ever seen in a church this was a while ago this is what was before we came here our church visited another church in our association and we all gathered together there on a Sunday night for worship.

When I walked into the sanctuary as is the case in many Baptist churches the baptistry is right behind the pulpit and their baptistry was covered with a sheet that must have been on plywood covering up the baptistry and on top of the baptistry there were you know, all kinds of artificial plants and ornate candle holders and one of those big giant Bibles you know, that you often see in churches that was sitting on top of it.

And that picture communicated a couple of things to me. One it's been a long time since this church has baptized anyone because they treat it as a decoration now just a table to sit things on top of and two it doesn't seem like they expect that they're going to baptize anybody anytime soon and that's sad a thriving churches expects that in their devotion to Christ as they characterize who he is to see the miracle of salvation taking place in their midst as God saves people and adds them to his church a thriving church is also characterized by its generosity as we see in verses 44 through the beginning of verse 46 and all who believed were together and had all things in common and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need and day by day they were attending the temple together so here it's important that we have some

context to understand what kind of sharing was going on this important moment at Pentecost when 3,000 people were saved and the church was born that was a feast of the Jews and so many Jews were traveling from outside of Jerusalem into Jerusalem and all of a sudden they go there and they're saved when they hear

God's word proclaimed and preached and they wanted to stay in Jerusalem to be a part of this awesome new thing that God was doing this new work of his and so they didn't have a home or a place to stay in Jerusalem and so those believers who lived there in the city opened up their homes so that they had a place to stay and they shared with them their food and supplies because they weren't planning to be there as long as they were and no doubt they also pulled together their resources to help those who were poor and in need but notice they weren't forced by the government to give up what they had in verse 46 we read that many of them still lived in their own homes so this wasn't some kind of communistic communal type living this was a situation that only God could do through the working of his Holy Spirit as he shaped his people to be generous like his son Jesus Christ and is there anyone more generous than Jesus who left the glory of heavens behind to add a human nature to his divine one to be the suffering servant who was beaten spit upon crucified and died to give his life in order to save those who otherwise would have no opportunity to be saved a thriving church is generous a thriving church is also hospitable verse 46 it says in breaking bread in their homes they received their food with glad and generous hearts in the early church after they had communion they often accompanied that by what they called a love feast where people would gather together in one of their homes and they would share a meal and we see later on that this became a problem with the

Corinthian church where they were going to this love feast and some of them the richer ones I mean they were having a great time they were eating filet mignon and steak and all that good stuff and then somebody down the table was eating you know a bologna sandwich well maybe just a piece of bologna because they didn't even have enough money for the bread to put the bologna in between Paul says this is a problem this does not reflect the generosity and the goodness of our Lord it'd be like us imagining a potluck we have we'll have one today but imagine we did that every Sunday and some of us brought our own food you know lobster and steak and somebody over here was you know opening up a can of spam some of you like spam that's there's something wrong with you you're probably the people who cheer for OU but anyhow anyhow I've been here for five years I can say some of these things though right just joking but you know if you walked into that and you saw a table over here they're eating steak and lobster this guy over here is eating a can of spam that would communicate something to them that is not accurate in who the Lord is and often you know what we see in the New Testament in the Gospels

[34 : 15] Jesus eating with people you ever notice that how often he would eat with people how often he would invite himself over to their house you know Zacchaeus I'm coming to your house we're gonna eat and we're gonna have fellowship why because there's something about sharing a meal together that creates opportunities for fellowship it's just an intimate thing an intimate setting where you get to know one another in fact we see Jesus performing the miracle of dividing the fish and the bread multiple times because he had compassion over the crowds that had followed him he wanted them to enjoy that kind of fellowship and so he provided for them he was hospitable!

So maybe we need to have potlucks after church every Sunday and all of our stomachs said amen right? I'll bring this back yeah you won't be sitting at my table alright but most importantly a church that thrives does not turn away from those who have material and spiritual needs in 1 John 3 16 through 18 it says by this we know love that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers but if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need yet closes his heart against him how does God's love abide in him little children let us not love in word or talk but in deed and truth a church that thrives is a generous and hospitable church and they're also a joyful church you see these people were happy to do these things and that characterizes Jesus doesn't it who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross knowing what it would achieve for you and for me but more importantly knowing that in doing so he would glorify God the father when a church is devoted to Jesus that church possesses the character of Jesus and there will be joy Philippians 2 1 through 2 says so if there is any encouragement in Christ any comfort from love any participation in the spirit any affection and sympathy complete my joy by being of the same mind have the same love being in full accord and of one mind church that thrives is devoted to Jesus it possesses the character of Jesus reflects that and then thirdly the church that

thrives will make an impact for Jesus verse 47 again reflecting their joy it says they're praising God they're having favor with all people and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved in

John 17 on the eve of his crucifixion if you remember Jesus prayed in the presence of his disciples and he prayed for his church listen to his request he said I do not ask for these only referring to the disciples who are there with him but also for those who will believe in me through their word this church thrived because it was the kind of church that Jesus prayed for it thrived because it chose to be devoted to his word it strove to possess his character and the result was that they had a huge impact on each other and in their community which glorified God you know something Danny and I have sought to ingrain into the minds of our children is the importance of their behavior especially when we're not around to monitor their behavior whether that's in school or sports or in church or some other kind of extracurricular activity and their behavior behavior is important to us because it reflects what

Danny and I have taught them to value and most importantly we want them to value the things that God has instructed them to value if you saw my kids fighting each other in public yelling at each other pulling each other's hair out gossiping picking on other people stomping their feet around with angry expressions on their faces whining and complaining and being critical and selfish that would reflect something wouldn't it it would reflect something about Danny and I now I have good kids I have good kids and I love my kids and I'm thankful that they are so well behaved whenever we're not around but this is my point if in our church we are fighting each other if we are being short with one another if we are seeking to avoid one another if we're gossiping about one another if we're acting like we're angry when we are here and not happy to be here doesn't that reflect something about what we think and how we feel towards our heavenly father we're his children are we not and I don't know about you but I hope that you want to represent your heavenly father well and you do that in how you act how you interact with other people in this church who are a part of your family [40 : 28] I want people to know how good and how gracious and how kind and how loving and how merciful my heavenly father is and I hope that in the way I conduct myself and they know that I belong to Christ that that communicates to them how good God is thriving churches do that they reflect their Lord well they reflect their heavenly father well and when that happens as we've seen here the world can't help but take notice they take notice and God uses that in ways that far exceed our expectations so here's the main point of application for our church to thrive you must thrive in your pursuit of Jesus for our church to thrive you must be thriving in your pursuit of Jesus being devoted to him spending time with him in his word and in prayer being a part of his church and seeking to be obedient to fulfill all of those one another commands that he's given us his children you know

I'm so glad that the Lord led us to this church remember that night when I came in view of call many of you were here there were 66 people there that night to extend the call to us to come and to serve here and I love this church I really do and I'm not just saying that because it's something that maybe you think a pastor should say after he's been at a place for five years but I really do love this church and as I said before I'm really excited for our church we've survived the past five years together and now it's time for us to continue to thrive as we seek to know Christ more and as we seek collectively to do more to make him known one question of application today how will you help our church thrive how will you help our church thrive maybe you're at odds with somebody in this church and it's creating divisions you'll help our church thrive by forgiving that person or going to that person asking them for forgiveness how can you help this church thrive well you know as Hannah mentioned at the beginning we need help with Awana and volunteers come be a part of that there are many ways that you can be at work here to help this church thrive and a big part of it a big part of it is just being here it's just being here it's getting involved it's knowing the people in your church it's caring about them and loving them and encouraging them exhorting them and at times maybe even gently and graciously rebuking them when they've gone astray the church that thrives is the church where each person is pursuing Christ let's pray Lord we are so thankful to know what you expect of your church God you've made it clear and you've shown us a beautiful example of that here in Acts chapter 2 Lord so often we are deceived into thinking that thriving churches are a result of something that people do some kind of exciting new program or flashy new logo or or entertaining worship

God it's so simple we are to be devoted to you in our devotion to you we will reflect your character and in that you will have an impact through our church and so God I pray that for us here at Highland Park that we would be devoted to these things that we would possess the character of your son that we would thrive in ways that we have and would just excel even more so and ultimately Lord our greatest request in all of this is that you would be glorified in it that it would please you and we can't do it without you and so we pray for your help in Jesus name we pray you