



DESPERATELY SEARCHING FOR HELP

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Church was boring. After four years in a little town in the northwest United States, each Sunday seemed more routine. Tragically, I was the pastor.

It was not like that when Linda (my wife) and I first started to lead the church. In the beginning, everything was a challenge. Living in a beautiful ski resort town in the mountains, people frequently came to our area to avoid the typical lifestyle of work and raising a family. Many young, unemployed, society drop-outs found their way to our church. New people were showing up every Sunday, and many came from difficult life situations. Church was exciting!

However, as the years went by, things became more settled and dignified. The young people matured. Normal families—those with jobs—started attending the church. As the congregation grew, we became comfortable and more socially acceptable.

Of course, there were many positive aspects to our growth, but I began to miss the free-spirited individuals who used to show up at church. I wanted to see more people come out of serious problems and step onto a road to victory. So I began to pray. I prayed especially for the people in my town who *really* needed help. Of

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course, everyone needs some help, but I was concerned about individuals who were in serious bondage to sin. I wanted to see God set them free.

Being a pastor in a small town (about 4,000 people), most of the locals knew me. I didn't know all of their names, but I could recognize the visible ones. Twelve individuals stood out as needing God's touch more than others. I began to pray for those twelve. A deep compassion filled my heart. I began to think of them lovingly as my "dirty dozen."

Church life went on as usual and I continued to pray. Then one evening I decided to reach out to those dozen individuals who had found their way into my heart. I went to some of their homes. I telephoned others. Then I walked the streets and entered the local bars to find the rest. During my visit with each of them, I asked each one to come visit me later that night in a church-owned apartment where I was going to minister to them personally. It must have been the grace of God, because that first night all twelve showed up.

In that room, six of the twelve sitting in front of me had spent time in jail. At least two of them had been in prison for murder. Another had spent time behind bars for armed robbery. Ten were men and two were women. One man for years had given himself to bizarre sexual perversions. One woman was a practicing lesbian. Two nights earlier one had tried to commit suicide. That night, as they all waited to

hear what I had to say, it was obvious that several were drunk or high on drugs.

I taught on the love of God. I spent two hours pouring out my heart and doing everything I could to convince them that God loves them, in spite of anything they had done. I showed them from the Bible how God's love is based on His nature, not our failures or successes. I explained that it did not matter how many times they had been in jail or committed adultery. I talked to them about God's willingness to forgive any and every sexual sin. I told them that God wanted to love each of them as they always had wanted to be loved. At the end of our evening together, they all bowed their heads and joined me in a prayer to receive God's love and forgiveness.

That was not only a new start for them, it was a new beginning for me.

Two evenings later I reached out to the same twelve. I went and got them. Just because they had prayed a prayer did not mean they were instantly freed of their sin problems. I found them in their homes, I walked the streets, and I searched the same bars. I collected all twelve and gathered them back into our church apartment.

That second night I taught them about God's Holy Spirit and how they could be freed of sin. I had brought with me that evening some cigarettes and a bottle of vodka. At one point I poured a glass of vodka and told them—with all the passion I could muster—how God could set

them free. As I threw the glass out a nearby open window, some of the men looked on with longing eyes. I hoped that they soon would be longing for God with similar earnestness.

I finished that evening praying for each one that they might receive an empowering of God's Holy Spirit. Until that night, some of them could not even imagine God's willingness to reach down to them. They actually wanted help, but previously had no hope. For me, it was worth everything to see a glimmer of light in their eyes realizing that perhaps God really did care.

Within a week, I went out to gather those same twelve. We called the group "Overcomers," because that identified our goal. We came together not just for two or three meetings but several times each week for an extended period.

I loved those twelve. I desperately wanted to see them freed of their bondages. I wanted to see them know God more intimately and walk in His power.

However, during that season of my life, I was fighting not only for them, but for myself, as well. I was just as enslaved to my own sins as they were to theirs. Below the outward face of this pastor was a man buried in depression and tormenting thoughts—struggles I'd had for years, and only with God's help was I able to keep contained. I hated myself for being weak and beaten, always having to restrain a whirlwind of negative thoughts. I did not like what it did to my marriage or my walk with God.

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I was angry inside, and I was ashamed that in truth I was less than the man of God which people believed I was.

Working with those dozen struggling souls gave me hope. I knew if they could find freedom, then I could also.

I read books. I talked to others. I prayed. When one brother was sentenced to go through a state-run drug-and-alcohol-treatment program, I volunteered to stand by him and submit to the family-treatment portion of the program. I sought God for each of them—but even more for myself. We incorporated truths from every avenue available, including psychology, inner healing, and demon deliverance. Many things helped, but it was searching through the book of Romans that made God's answers clear to me.