

LET'S
PRAY



21-DAY
PRAYER
GUIDE

GOD LOOKS AT THE HEART

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. **MATTHEW 6:5-8**

Have you ever set aside time for yourself to pray but, to your frustration, found yourself at a loss for words? Do you sometimes feel burdened by the pressure to bring words to God that sound important and “righteous”? While engaged in a group prayer, have you felt the need to add intellectual words so people will think of you as more spiritual than you are?

As Christians, we can take great comfort in knowing Jesus gave us instruction on how to pray. Not only did He give us an example through the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, He also teaches us in verses 5-8 the kind of heart attitude He desires we bring to prayer. Jesus tells Christians not to pray like the hypocrites. He doesn’t want us to pray with the hope of being seen or noticed by others (v.5), and there’s no value to be found in heaping up empty or meaningless phrases (v.7).

We know God is not prohibiting public prayer in these verses because Jesus Himself prayed in public. We know He isn’t speaking against repetition in prayer because other Scripture passages model this. In light of this, what conclusion can we draw from Matthew 6:5-8? Jesus is concerned with our hearts. It’s possible to pray in private with a prideful heart and in public with a heart completely focused on God.

God-honoring prayer spoken with a genuine heart can look many different ways: crying out to God with eyes wide open on the drive to work, praying with an injured child on the playground, a silent whisper for help before responding to hurtful words, in the quiet of a living room on your knees before the Lord. He doesn’t ask for our words to be perfect, and He doesn’t need to be impressed. Only God sees our inmost motivations and knows our hearts completely. He desires we come to Him in prayer, not to impress or inspire but with a genuine heart of worship and reverence.

PRACTICE

Read Matthew 6:5-8 and reflect on the following:

If this passage convicts you in any way, confess it to God. God loves you, and you can rejoice that the penalty for all your sins, no matter how big or small, has been paid by Jesus. Do you ever feel hindered in your prayers by pressures or expectations that don’t come from God? As you pray this week, start by taking a deep breath and asking God to help you let go of these things.

LET’S PRAY *Father God, I want my conversations with You to be genuine. You know my heart completely, and I praise You for that. When I pray in public or private, I want to honor You. Help me remember I can talk to You about anything, anywhere, anytime. Thank You for the gift of prayer. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

START WITH GOD

This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name. MATTHEW 6:9

When Jesus' followers asked Him to teach them to pray, He gave them what we now refer to as "The Lord's Prayer." He began by addressing God, followed by six requests. Some of us grew up repeating this weekly in church, and for others, it's new. It can be a prayer we hear so often we forget to pause and reflect on it.

In our own prayer life, sometimes our greatest hurdle is how to initiate prayer. Our minds swarm with thoughts: "There is so much to pray about. Where do I begin?" Jesus started with God by acknowledging who God is in relationship to Him. He wasn't talking to Peter or Andrew or Mary or Martha. Jesus was talking to His Father in Heaven, and He addressed Him as such. The word Jesus used for "Father" was "Abba," which was a term of endearment. "Hallowed" isn't a term we often use outside of the Lord's Prayer; it means sacred and set apart. Before jumping into His requests, Jesus acknowledged He was praying to a holy God.

Sometimes we need to be reminded of who we're praying to, and addressing God can soften our hearts as we begin. We have many conversations with others throughout our day, and prayer feel like just another chat. Pausing to align our hearts with God's and saying "Holy Father" reminds us we are talking to our holy God who is also a perfect, loving Father to us. What a privilege!

PRACTICE

Read the following passages and reflect on Jesus' prayers:
Matthew 26:42, Matthew 27:46, Luke 23:46, John 17:1-26

Notice how Jesus initiated His prayers and the way He spoke with His Father. Jesus didn't follow a script. His prayers reflected the moment He was in and were different lengths. They were conversational yet acknowledged God for who He is. Spend the next few minutes praying, using Jesus as your example. Start by acknowledging God. You can use the phrases Father, Lord, Abba, God in Heaven or any appropriate way to address God that feels fitting to you in the moment.

LET'S PRAY *Lord, thank You for giving us Your Word and teaching us how to pray. When I pray, I want to remember and acknowledge who You are. I don't ever want to become numb to the gift of praying to You.*

REMEMBERING THE CHARACTER OF GOD

...The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness EXODUS 34:6

...I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. JONAH 4:2

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. PSALM 145:8

The acknowledgement of God's character is boldly declared by many biblical figures throughout the Old Testament. God described Himself with the words in Exodus 34, Jonah cried out to God in a moment of anger with those same words, and David wrote them into a song in Psalm 145.

Just as Jesus prayed "Hallowed be your name" and remembered God's holiness, acknowledging the characteristics of God can become a beautiful part of our own prayers. No matter what circumstances we are facing as we pray, God never changes. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Incorporating this practice into our prayer life brings focus off ourselves, our fears and doubts and onto God. Not only does this rightsize us, it's also comforting to come to God with our pain, questions and circumstances and be reminded of who He is and desire deeper intimacy with Him.

PRACTICE

Let's begin modeling this practice today. Take time to pray and reflect on the character of God. Open your Bible to Exodus 34, and use some of the words God chose to describe Himself in your prayer.

LET'S PRAY *Father God, thank You for who You are - a good, loving Father who is faithful and kind. I rejoice that You are a forgiving God. Help me focus on You today and remember Your goodness. I desire to be close to You and know Your character. Amen.*

CENTERING YOUR PRAYERS ON THE WILL OF GOD

Your kingdom come, your will be done... MATTHEW 6:10

Most of us enter conversations with an agenda. We have meetings at work for a specific purpose, talk to our child about kindness because we want them to learn to be kind, console our best friends when they're hurting because we want them to feel better. This isn't a bad thing, but have you ever experienced a time when your agenda dominated the discussion in an unhelpful way? A good idea was overlooked because it didn't push the meeting forward, you missed the chance to discuss the Gospel with your child to quickly modify their behavior, your best friend felt unloved because they wanted you to listen.

This same pattern can play out in our prayer life. We list our requests to God and tell Him exactly how we'd like Him to respond. We can be so sure of what we want and need from God that we don't take the time to listen or consider His ways are higher than ours. When Jesus taught us to pray, the first desire He expressed was that God's will be done. Before asking for daily bread and debts to be forgiven, Jesus said, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done..." Praying this humbles us and reminds us God's will being done is our ultimate desire.

Praying for God's will isn't always easy. Sometimes it's the last thing we want to do. Before Jesus went to the cross, He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). Jesus told God what He desired in that unfathomable, difficult moment. He didn't feel a need to hide His desires from God and ultimately submitted to God's will.

PRACTICE

We can find great freedom bringing our requests to God, sharing with Him our desires and still asking for His will to be done. This is what Jesus did. Is there a situation in your life that needs to be submitted to God's will? Begin this practice today. It can be this simple:

LET'S PRAY *Father God, I ask that You please _____, but more than anything, I pray Your will, not mine, be done. Amen.*

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

On earth as it is in heaven MATTHEW 6:10

Jesus desires His followers obey God and seek His will in the same way God is obeyed in Heaven. He wants us to live a holy life. One way we can do this is by aligning our hearts with His through prayer. When we're concerned about the things God is, we become more like Him. When we spend time talking to God, we are more in tune with what He's doing around us.

Psalm 139:23-24 says, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." This is an intimidating prayer. It's a vulnerable thing to ask God to search us, but imagine the way our hearts will change if we pray like David in Psalm 139 and listen for God's response. It brings us closer to Jesus' desire of "on earth as it is in heaven."

WEEK ONE ■ DAY FIVE

PRACTICE

As you pray today, use Psalm 139:23-24 as a guide:

Search me, O God, and know my heart Does my heart break for what breaks Yours? What are the desires of my heart? God, align my heart with Yours!

Test me and know my anxious thoughts Are my thoughts honorable? Do I have sinful thoughts that go unchecked? Lord, I want to honor You in what is hidden, not just what is seen.

See if there is any offensive way in me Is there anything I am doing that offends You, God? Is there anything I'm doing that offends those around me? God, help me love my neighbor and You well.

Lead me in the way everlasting God, align my heart with Yours. I desire to be led by You, not culture or my own desires.

LET'S PRAY *God, I don't want the questions I reflected upon today to be a one-time thing. I want to continually align my heart with Yours. Please keep making me more like You. Amen.*

DISCIPLINE

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. **MARK 1:35**

Verses like the one above are scattered through the Gospels. Not only did Jesus give us examples of how to pray, the Bible shows us glimpses of His prayer life. Jesus, who is one with God the Father, set aside the work He was doing and sought time to pray. If the all-knowing, powerful, sinless Jesus needed time to pray, how much more should we as His followers make prayer a priority? If anyone has ever had reason to be “too busy” to pray with “too much” important work to do, it was Jesus. Instead, we see Him seek out solitude and prayer with discipline.

We’ve all experienced times when we lack the motivation to pray. This is okay! In these times, we should still pray. We can remain steadfast and trust God hears us despite any emotions we are working through. We can be honest with God about what we are feeling. He knows what it is like to be human, and He sympathizes with us. If setting aside time to pray was important for Jesus, it should be important for us.

In addition to Jesus’ life, we see the fruitfulness of disciplined prayer in other parts of the Bible. In Daniel 6, King Darius made an ordinance that anyone who prayed to someone other than him would be thrown into a lion’s den. Daniel, a faithful servant of God, knew this but continued to get down on his knees and pray three times a day, which was his habit. This bore much fruit! God’s power was shown to many as He rescued Daniel from the lion’s den, and King Darius declared the people should worship the God of Daniel.

When we engage in the discipline of prayer, it will bear fruit and become second nature. If we wait only until we *feel* like praying, we will miss the opportunity to have a deeper intimacy with God that comes through faithful prayer.

PRACTICE

What is your next step in the discipline of prayer? For some, this might mean waking up five minutes earlier each day to pray. For others, it may mean praying while you do the dishes. You can pray any time and any place! Set an attainable goal for you and one reasonable for your stage of life. If you’re unsure of what your step should be, ask God for wisdom. Share your goal with a friend and ask them to check in with you.

LET’S PRAY *Father God, I want to be disciplined in my prayer life. Please compel me to talk with You regularly. I know prayer is important and want my life to reflect that. Give me the strength to pray even when I don’t feel like it and help me be vulnerable and honest with You always. Amen.*

■ LISTEN

Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth! **PSALM 46:10**

The world around us is loud. The many resources at our disposal—TV, social media, podcasts, books—make it possible to go an entire day without one moment of silence. For many of us, COVID-19, despite all the devastation it brought to our world, caused our lives to pause for the first time in a long time. How does silence factor into our prayer life? We need to make time to listen to God because prayer isn't a one-way conversation. When we are still and silent, we practice humility. We admit the world will not cease because we take a short break from production. God is on His throne, and a pause from "doing" doesn't change that. He will be exalted in the earth amidst our stillness.

For many of us, being still is difficult. It's not a habit, and if we're honest, it's hard to be alone with our thoughts. Once again, we can use Jesus as our model for this practice because He often prayed alone. Before beginning His ministry on earth, He spent forty days in solitude! Spend five minutes today being completely still and silent. Set a timer if you need to, and reflect on these questions:

Is it difficult for you to experience silence? If so, why?

Where do your thoughts wander? Why?

Did your silence reveal anything you need to pray about? If so, set aside time to share with God what's on your heart.

PRACTICE

Commit to making the practice of silence a habit. A reasonable goal for you may be starting with three minutes a day. Continue reflecting on the questions above. If this is a practice you're already engaging in, maybe your next step is to take a half day away. Look for changes in your heart and life as you practice this, asking God for help; He is faithful to give it!

LET'S PRAY *Father God, I want to be still before You. I admit it is sometimes difficult for me to be silent. I don't want to miss what You have to show me through quieting myself. Help me learn this habit. Amen.*

DAILY BREAD

Man does not live on bread alone but on every word
that comes from the mouth of the Lord. DEUTERONOMY 8:3

Loved. Saved. Redeemed. Forgiven. Adopted. All words from the Word. The Bible sustains us with life-affirming messages. We need spiritual Bread from our Father on a daily basis to keep us filled, healthy and ready for whatever plans He lays before us. The Bible is the only food that satisfies our souls and brings life and health to our spirits. It is as important to us as bread is to our bodies.

In a season of uncertainty, God's Word is certain. In the midst of chaos, His Word brings peace. In a changing world, God's promises are steady. From Genesis to Revelation, His Spirit breathes through every verse. Jesus speaks to us through the Gospels, prophets, and letters left by His disciples. As we allow ourselves a daily diet of the Bread of Life, the stories and teachings contained in each book draw us ever closer to God. Silently or aloud, alone or with a group, the Word of God fills us with heavenly Bread! The result? Peace the world can't offer us, joy despite our circumstances, love for those in our circle and faith in the One who holds all things together.

WEEK TWO ■ DAY EIGHT

PRACTICE

If you are not currently in a rhythm of daily Bible reading, start now. If you already have that rhythm in place, try something new! A daily dose of Bible looks different for everyone because of the various ways we are wired and our seasons of life. Some people read aloud a family devotional or passage of Scripture to start or end their day. Many challenge themselves by studying or memorizing verses that help direct their thoughts and realign their hearts. Listening to the Bible while working out or driving to work can fill and sustain us. If you are not sure which rhythm is right for you, try different times and ways until you find one that fills your heart with heavenly Bread.

LET'S PRAY *Father God, thank You for Your heavenly bread I can read and listen to from the Bible. Help me seek out time every day to direct my thoughts and actions toward You. Draw me into Your presence so I can lead others to You. Amen.*

ONLY TODAY

So do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. **MATTHEW 6:31-34**

It's so easy to get caught up in a toxic spiral of worry and anxiety when our world seems out of normal rhythm. With guidelines and situations changing almost daily, it's hard not to get caught up in the frenzy of worry. “What-if”s are rampant in our community today:

- What if I lose my job?
- What if my grandpa gets the virus?
- What if my kids can't go back to school?
- What if I can't see my family for months?

Jesus reminds us many of our worries are about tomorrow's troubles, not today's. He isn't saying to live without planning because we know our God is a God of order. He's saying don't run after what we think we need out of worry or anxiety. Don't let our worries about tomorrow consume our today. Instead, we need to stand still in the presence of Jesus today. When we do that, we will see today's troubles are manageable because we are putting tomorrow's troubles on the One who created us. Our hope and future are in His loving, nail-pierced hands.

PRACTICE

Prayer is powerful for releasing anxiety and fear and receiving the comfort, hope and joy only God can give. Here is an outline for a “Release and Receive” Prayer:

Spend two minutes taking deep breaths, eyes closed, sitting up straight with hands resting on knees, palms down.

After two minutes, release all your anxieties to God using the following phrases:

- “I release (this situation) to You.”
- “I release (this fear) to You.”
- “I ask forgiveness for (this sin) from You.”

When you are finished, turn your palms up and receive heavenly blessings from God.

- “I receive Your forgiveness.”
- “I receive Your love.”
- “I receive Your peace.”
- “I receive Your joy.”

LET'S PRAY *Jesus, thank You for reminding me You have tomorrow in Your hands. Help me to not be anxious about the future, trust Your love and care, see the daily blessings You give and be still in Your presence today. Amen.*

PRAYING FOR OUR FAMILIES

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. EPHESIANS 3:14-19

If our children and spouses are at home with us, many of us have had LOTS of family time lately. Others are aching for time with aging parents, grown children or grandchildren. Wherever you are right now, we know family relationships have taken on a whole new meaning in the last few months. With concerns for safety from disease and violence, now more than ever, we need to spend time on our knees before the Father in prayer for our families.

As the verses above exclaim, we are all part of God's family, created in His image, loved as His children and bought back from the penalties of sin and death with the price of His Son's life. We are created for community, connection, close loving relationships and family life. Even if our family looks rather broken and shattered, we can hold them up to our heavenly Father who hears our cries and comforts our souls. When we draw close to God through prayer, we are able to see others as God sees them and connect in a way beyond our own power.

PRACTICE

Set aside time today to pray for each member of your family, both those inside and outside your home. Give yourself adequate time so you don't feel rushed. As each person comes to mind, allow the Spirit to guide you in your prayer. The Spirit knows the heart of the person and can direct you to pray in a way you may have never thought.

LET'S PRAY *Lord, please strengthen me with the power of Your Spirit so Christ through faith can live in my heart. Together with my family, help me understand how wide and long and high and deep is Your love for us through Christ. This love is beyond my understanding, but I believe You will keep my family and me in Your hands as we live through this moment, day and season. Amen.*

PRAYING FOR OUR NEIGHBORS

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. **EPHESIANS 1:17-19**

In a time when social distancing is the norm, it's more difficult to connect with our neighbors. Should I let my kids play with theirs? Should I invite them over for a barbeque? Should I pet their dog? These and many other strange thoughts and questions are for neighbors who may already be our friends!

What about our neighbors whom we smile and wave at on our way to work or on our walks? The people whom you can't quite remember their names, but you know where they work or where their kids go to school? Do you ever wonder how they are holding up, if they are struggling with isolation, money issues or depression? With so much extra time because of cancelled activities and vacations, many of us have more opportunities than ever to connect with our neighbors and advance the Kingdom!

PRACTICE

Our first step is to pray for wisdom and discernment before approaching our neighbors. Before stepping out on our decks, sidewalks, hallways or parking lots, we need to pray for courage, boldness, compassion, joy, but most of all, love. Pray for opportunities every day to engage in life with our neighbors.

Our next step is to intentionally approach our neighbors with a smile, in conversation or maybe even a socially-distanced visit in a back yard. Let's take the step of friendship and share the "hope to which he has called you" with our Little Iowa!

LET'S PRAY *Jesus, help me be a daily reminder to my neighbors of the hope to which You have called me through my words and actions. I especially pray for _____ that I am a witness to Your love. Please give my neighbors the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to know You better. Open their minds and hearts so they put their hope and trust in You. Amen.*

PRAYING FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOL PERSONNEL

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith,
your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our
Lord Jesus Christ. 1 THESSALONIANS 1:3

Who would have imagined a year ago empty classrooms and Zoom teaching would be the norm? Or that locker rooms would be locked down? Graduation parties a party of one? Parents working and teaching their children from home for months? Classrooms emptied, plans upended, connections with many students lost because of lack of access to technology and motivational issues, all because of a pandemic.

This coming school year will look different for nearly all students across our country and world. Teachers have to retool, reassess and realign their teaching with current conditions. Administrators will prepare for three or more scenarios, and school staff will update and communicate with parents and teachers and deal with safety issues none of us would have imagined a few months ago.

Running through every school personnel's mind:

How do I assess what my students need this year?

How do I teach the skills and knowledge I have been trained to do in a safe way?

How can I encourage my students and create a safe learning environment in the midst of so much uncertainty?

It will take endurance, patience, flexibility, compassion and strength for our teachers, administrators and school staff to navigate this year's school schedule.

We still aren't certain what the future holds for this coming school year, but we know the One who does. Jesus is our strength when we are weak; He is constant when the world seems out of order; His peace is ours when we put our faith in Him. Jesus inspires and empowers us to spread hope to teachers, administrators and students.

PRACTICE

If possible, drive by or walk to a nearby school or the school your children or grandchildren attend and pray over the building. Pray for the teachers, staff and students as they start their school year.

LET'S PRAY *Father God, be with all the decisions that need to be made in school districts around the country, especially in my local school district. I pray for _____ and all the teachers, administrators and school staff. Give them wisdom, strength, endurance and hope as they navigate all the decisions that need to be made. Be with each student and help them learn in an environment that is safe and free from fear. Amen.*

PRAYING FOR FIRST RESPONDERS & HEALTHCARE WORKERS

For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight. **PSALM 72:12-14**

In the midst of great sorrows and upheavals are great heroes, those who step into situations others run from. God uses these people to deliver the needy, afflicted, oppressed and hurting in our community. You probably have people in your own family who have been part of this courageous struggle. Doctors, nurses, EMTs, police officers, fire fighters and others have all been taxed and strained, stretched and sometimes broken during this season of pandemic and protests. Stress and fatigue from double shifts, violence, mental anguish and emotionally charged situations have brought many to their breaking points during the last few months. In spite of COVID-19, protests and other crises, they show up, step up and never give up. Tremendous power and responsibility have been placed on their shoulders to help and heal the hurting in our country, and although we can't carry those burdens for them, we can pray for them.

Like Paul, we can be that continual voice lifting up to God first responders and their families in our communities. On our knees, we can lift up in prayer those who lift us up. They need strength, endurance, perseverance, patience and most of all, Jesus. They need to believe in His saving love, His sacrifice for them and that He died in their place conquering death so they can live forever with Him in Heaven.

PRACTICE

The next time you drive by a hospital, police station, fire house or hear the sirens or see lights on the side of the road, pray for the people who are in uniform or scrubs caring and helping keep people safe. Pray specifically for their safety, health, wisdom and strength. If you personally know a first responder, text or call them today and thank them for their work and let them know you will be praying for them.

LET'S PRAY *Father God, thank You for our first responders. Help me remember them in my daily prayers. Please keep them safe from harm and sickness as they help and heal the hurting in our community. Fill them with Your knowledge, wisdom, understanding and love. Give them great endurance and patience and help them come to know You as their Savior. Amen.*

PRAYING FOR OUR LEADERS

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-2

God has graciously provided leaders—in our church, community, state and country—to inspire and help unite those under their leadership. As grand as that sounds, it's hard work, especially now. Our leaders had no idea this season was coming when they took office or stepped in front of their churches. Health issues, economic downturns, social justice in the black community and safety for our vulnerable populations are now on their shoulders. We have seen our community, local government and state agencies collaborate like never before to come up with solutions for issues impacting our lives.

God has appointed leaders for this time in our country, and our responsibility is to pray for them. They need the Spirit's help now more than ever. Our leaders may never be as wise as Solomon, humble as Moses or follow God like David, but if we lift them up to God in prayer, we can walk alongside them. We can model the kind of character we would like to see in our leaders and show them compassion and respect for their willingness to serve our community, church, state or country.

PRACTICE

Contact your pastor and let him know you will be praying for him today. If you know other leaders in your community, text them ask how you can pray for them. Spend time today on your knees for our church and community leaders.

LET'S PRAY *Lord, I lift up all the leaders in my community:*

Pastor _____, Mayor _____, Governor Reynolds, President Trump and all those who are part of leadership in our community, state and country. Thank You, Lord, for their willingness to serve. Give them Your wisdom, compassion and strength as they lead us through these times. Most of all, Lord, let them be drawn by Your Spirit to lean into You. We know all things are in Your hands. Let me remember daily to lift them up so we can live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. Amen.

MY FORGIVENESS

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 JOHN 1:9

The Bible has a lot to say and about forgiveness. Jesus talks repeatedly about it, and it makes sense that He would. It's the reason He came to this earth and chose to suffer and die for us. When we boil it down, His entire ministry was based on our need for forgiveness and His ability to provide it. Still, it's a subject we tend to glaze over.

We view forgiveness as a pardon for our bad behavior or the chance to secure eternal destiny. We pray a few prayers and call it good, breathing a sigh of relief that we've got things figured out.

But what happens the next time we need to be forgiven? And the next? And what happens when we're faced with the reality that we need to extend forgiveness to someone else?

Let's look at why forgiveness is important. Jesus talks about forgiveness as an act of prayer because He views it as a conversation between us and God. The Bible says God is righteous, which means holy. Confusing or strange as it sounds, our sin breaks down our ability to be righteous or holy. It inhibits our ability to connect with God, creates barriers and breaks down our channels of communication.

The same thing happens in our relationships with others. When we hurt or are hurt by someone, barriers and walls go up. We find it harder to talk to each other, to have a heart-to-heart conversation, and we may even avoid each other.

This barrier—sin—prevents us from having a relationship with God. When we step over the Faith Line, we pray for forgiveness, but even after this decision, we continue sinning. It's part of our human nature. Because of this, forgiveness should be a vital part of our relationship with God. It's not a one-and-done action but something that should regularly be worked into our time with God. When we begin practicing this, we will be amazed at how rich our relationship becomes.

PRACTICE

When you pray, begin with forgiveness. Ask the Lord to show you anything that needs repentance. As things come to the forefront of your mind, ask for forgiveness, but be sure to follow that up with a second request—asking Him to help you change your desires.

LET'S PRAY *Lord, forgive me for my selfish and self-seeking choices. Forgive me for loving myself more than You. Help me see things from Your perspective, and give me a desire to change. Amen.*

FORGIVING OTHERS

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. **EPHESIANS 4:32**

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. **COLOSSIANS 3:13**

If we're not careful, it's possible to practice our faith without practicing the art of forgiveness. This becomes problematic because it prevents us from experiencing a deeper level of intimacy with God. Without forgiveness, we become stuck in the shallow waters of faith. Forgiveness, in its simplest form, is the act of releasing feelings like resentment, anger and hurt. It means deciding the person who hurt us doesn't owe us anything, and we are not going to hold anything against them.

It sounds really good on paper, but it's a lot harder to practice in real life. Why? Because people hurt us. Expectations get built up only to be shattered by the person who we thought would—or should—know what we need. Rejection stings, words get thrown around and emotions run high, especially after a long day or stressful situation. We get hurt and hurt each other.

The worst part is we tend to respond to the pain someone causes us by turning around and inflicting pain right back at them. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. A cutting word for a cutting word. Yet, the Bible continues to say forgive. Forgive, as you have been forgiven.

Jesus preaches kindness and compassion instead of revenge. The benefit of the doubt instead of pointing the finger. While most of us don't find ourselves throwing punches, we might find ourselves throwing someone under the bus. They deserve it, we say. While we might not shout it from the rooftops, our passive-aggressive behaviors toward one another scream hatred and contempt. We have every right to be angry, we tell ourselves. As Christians, Jesus points us to a better way. It might not feel natural at first, but when we stick with Him, the Lord promises to teach us how to offer mercy and kindness. He teaches us to forgive as He forgave us.

PRACTICE

Yesterday, you asked the Lord to reveal anything where you needed to ask forgiveness. Today, ask Him to show you whom you need to forgive*. He might bring up specific circumstances or people whom you resent. Don't be surprised to find you are holding on to grudges you weren't aware of; the mind has a funny way of hiding these things. As you move through your day, continue asking the Lord to reveal anyone you are holding something against, and as He does, stop and forgive them.

**In some circumstances, this might be very difficult, particularly in the case of an abuser. If you haven't already, we encourage you to seek counseling. We recognize forgiveness doesn't always come instantaneously and may need further prayer and time for healing.*

LET'S PRAY *Lord, I confess the sin of unforgiveness. Help me to forgive as You have forgiven me. Amen.*

THE PROBLEM OF UNFORGIVENESS

Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying “I repent,” you must forgive them. LUKE 17:4

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. MATTHEW 6:14-15

Yesterday, we discussed the importance of forgiving others and how forgiving can feel unnatural. Forgiveness is hard to practice because we often have strong emotions that need to be processed and dealt with. If we’re being honest, it’s easier to hold on to our emotions, refusing to forgive, than to deal with them. Instead, we try to push them down or leave them simmering beneath the surface

The problem is we view unforgiveness as “hurting others.” We say things like, “Why should I forgive them after what they did to me?” Maybe it’s more subtle than that, but either way, we withhold our attention, affection and even our love. We stop doing favors and being nice. We ghost people by cutting off all forms of communication instead of choosing to reconcile, all because we feel it’s what they deserve. We try to hurt them the way they’ve hurt us.

In reality, we’re hurting ourselves. Jesus instructs us to forgive because He knows how much it hurts us. It eats us from the inside out. Like a cancer we can’t feel until something starts to go wrong, unforgiveness leeches into our heart and destroys us. It’s like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

But, there’s something even more important about unforgiveness we tend to ignore. The Lord is very clear He expects us to forgive each other just like He forgave us. This isn’t just a healthy guideline but a serious command. It’s a deal-breaker. God says, “If you don’t, I won’t.”

PRACTICE

The Psalmist says, “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. *See if there is any offensive way in me,* and lead me in the way everlasting,” (Psalm 139:23-24, italics added). As you’re going about your day, ask the Lord if there’s anything you’re unaware of. Likewise, talk to Him about anything that’s been festering in your heart that you haven’t dealt with. This is best practiced when you repeat your prayer throughout the day, putting it in your own words and making it honest. Remember, prayer is just talking with God, so talk and listen to what He has to say.

LET’S PRAY *Lord, search my heart. Show me anything I’m holding on to that I need to release. Teach me to forgive others even when I don’t want to. Amen.*

WHY FORGIVENESS IS DIFFICULT

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. **MATTHEW 5:23-24**

And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. **MARK 11:25**

For the last few days, we've been talking about what God expects of us when it comes to forgiveness. We've been practicing the art of forgiveness through prayer. God commands us to forgive, but He also knows we need His help to do so. Today, we're going to dive a little deeper into why it's hard to forgive and look at what God wants for us right now. We've said forgiveness is hard because it's a choice to do something that feels unnatural. There may be strong emotions tied to it, but it's also hard because sometimes we don't realize we need to forgive. Let's explore these just a bit further and get a little more clarity. We have essentially put forgiveness into two categories—large and small. The large things seem too big to deal with while the small things seem minor, inconsequential, unimportant. Or at least that's what we tell ourselves.

Category 1 involves large things like betrayal, rejection and harm. These emotions can be extremely painful, so painful it is tempting to label offences as "unforgivable." At the very least, we say things like, "It's going to take me a long time to get over this" or "I don't know how I'll ever be able to forgive this." The task of forgiveness seems too great a burden to bear, so we put it on a shelf and tell ourselves it's impossible.

Category 2 involves small things that eat at us; they seem so small we probably don't realize forgiveness is even necessary. A rude comment, one-sided friendship or selfish choice that leaves us hanging. Circumstances like these are so common we think of them as "normal" and not something requiring our forgiveness. Left untended, the emotions we feel build up like layers of dynamite resulting in negative and even harmful consequences.

Simply put, both categories matter to God. Because they matter, we need to do the hard work of reconciling with Him and with others. Remember, this isn't just about "right and wrong" or "good choices vs. bad choices." Unforgiveness creates barriers between us and others and between us and God.

PRACTICE

In his message, Pastor John asked us to reflect on our spring and summer and invited us to (if we haven't already) "clean up our side of the road." You may need to start small, but it's important to follow through. Ask the Lord to give you wisdom (and maybe a little courage!) to confront someone about your own unforgiveness toward them. Remember, humility goes a long way. Choose your words carefully, but also remember they may not respond the way you'd like them to. That's ok; this is about you and God. You're not responsible for their response, only your thoughts and actions.

LET'S PRAY *Psalm 19:14 says, "May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." Use this verse as a starting point, and make it your own: Lord, I want the things I say and think to make You happy. Help me love You better in this way. Amen.*

A FRESH START

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. PSALM 19:14

Yesterday, we ended our time with a prayer from the Psalms. In his sermon, Pastor John encouraged us to start fresh. Why? Because forgiveness is not a one-time thing. The closer you grow to God and the more in tune you become to His Spirit, you'll start realizing forgiveness is an all-day, every-day kind of thing.

This is because we don't live in a vacuum where everything is happy and everyone is loving all the time. Despite our good intentions, the world goes on. Someone will cut you off in traffic, a stranger will become impatient with you (your loved ones most definitely will!), you will inevitably say something with a little bit of tone or your partner might spend too much time looking at their phone instead of listening to you. We live in a world where we hurt people, and we get hurt. In this inhospitable environment, God remains unmoving in His encouragement to us: forgive and seek forgiveness.

To live this out, we must stay in step with God's Spirit. If we don't, we'll run ourselves ragged trying to do the right thing. God doesn't send down a checklist to make sure you're following His rules. "Walk with me," He says. "Talk with me. Tell me how you're struggling, and we'll come up with a solution together."

This, my friends, is prayer.

It's the most perfect mentor relationship ever created. If you've struggled with unforgiveness, draw a line in the sand for yourself. Start fresh. Turn over a new leaf. Give yourself the gift of freedom from the negative emotions wearing you down.

"But how?" you ask. Start with this simple meditation from the Psalms: let what I say and think be pleasing to you, God. Love has a crazy way of reshaping everything. When we are pouring our energy into loving God well, things tend to fall into place. When we shift our perspective from what we are hurt or angry about to what we want to do for God, forgiveness becomes easier and more natural.

PRACTICE

Reflect on a few areas where you need to start fresh. Rather than focusing on what you don't want to do, center your mind on what you do want to do. Throughout your day, continue asking the Lord to help you accomplish these things.

LET'S PRAY *Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring love. Where there is offense, let me bring pardon. Where there is discord, let me bring union. Where there is error, let me bring truth. Where there is doubt, let me bring faith. Where there is despair, let me bring hope. Where there is darkness, let me bring your light. Where there is sadness, let me bring joy. O Master, let me not seek as much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, for it is in giving that one receives, it is in self-forgetting that one finds, it is in pardoning that one is pardoned, it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life. (Author unknown, though often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi)*

THE DANGER OF UNFORGIVENESS

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. **EPHESIANS 4:31-32**

Yesterday, we talked about starting fresh and choosing to honor the Lord with our words and thoughts. Choosing forgiveness. We have talked about how unforgiveness will eat us up if we let it. But, if we look a little further, we see Scripture views unforgiveness as a gateway to other sins.

When we harbor unforgiveness, be it our own unrepentant heart or refusing to forgive another, we open the floodgates for other sins and negative behaviors. As we let things fester, at some point they tend to boil over.

In other words, if we allow ourselves one sin—if we justify just one—the next sin and the next become much easier. If we say to ourselves, “I deserve to be angry for what they did,” we are inclining our heart toward more sins. It’s like opening a door just a crack and having water flood in. It becomes hard to control.

Luke 6:45-46 says, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”

1 Thessalonians 5:15 says, “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.”

Scripture is full of verses like these. Why does God care so much about this? Because He knows how easily one sin can lead to another. Unforgiveness can lead to envy, malice, short tempers, unkind words, divisions, finger pointing and many others.

God loves us so much He died to forgive us. In return, He asks us to become like Him. He wants to use us as His instruments to bring peace and love to the world and be examples of forgiveness and love so others might be drawn to Him. We can’t do this when we remain in our bitterness, resentment, self-centeredness and unforgiveness.

PRACTICE

Reflect on your habits and thought patterns. Ask the Lord to show you any sins inhibiting you from living a life that exemplifies Christ. As you go throughout your day, repeat this prayer again and again.

LET’S PRAY *Lord, change my heart. Help me see my sin from Your perspective and others through Your eyes. Make me more like You. Amen.*

COMMUNION WITH GOD

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. **MARK 12:30-31**

This week, we looked at forgiveness from several angles. We reflected on why it is important and were encouraged to take practical steps toward forgiveness. Today, we look at how forgiveness opens the door to deeper communion with God.

On Day 19, we briefly reflected on how our love for God is the best catalyst we have to take steps toward forgiveness. In fact, love should be our motivating factor for every decision we make.

Over the last century (and even the last 2000 years), the Church has tended to get hung up on right and wrong. We have fallen for the temptation to view God as a scowling master with a measuring stick intent on finding and punishing us for our flaws. However, Scripture clearly shows us our motivation for a life with Christ should be centered around love.

As we live a life in Christ, we must understand love and forgiveness go hand in hand. As we know God more intimately, a great love wells up in us. Compare a budding romance to a relationship that has lasted the test of time. Two starstruck lovers would say, "We love each other!" But it's the latter relationship that can truly say, "We love each other deeply, intimately, with a bond forged through time and struggles that can't easily be broken." Our relationship with God is just like this! The more we participate in the act of loving God, the more deeply we fall intimately in love with Him.

Why is this important? Because out of our love for God flows a desire to please Him. Just as in our human connections, the stronger our relationship with Him, the easier it becomes to please Him and the more we look, act and sound like Him. As this transformation takes place, God uses us to bless the world. He pours into us, and we pour out over others. The Lord's Prayer has a wonderful way of centering us toward this:

This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

PRACTICE

Read Matthew 6. This chapter houses the Lord's Prayer and has practical advice—Jesus' own words—on how to live in right relationship with God. Spend the next few days reflecting on the teachings of Jesus. Meditate on whatever stands out to you. Save it on your phone or keep it open in your browser so you can look back at it.

LET'S PRAY *God of Heaven and earth, Creator of time, space and our beating hearts, transform our hearts to beat as one with You. Transform our minds to think like You. Transform our bodies to act and respond to our world like You do. Transform our lives to live and serve like You. Let us be an instrument of Your peace and a vessel of Your Good News. Amen.*