



UPSTATE GROUP GUIDE

Prayer

July 27- August 2

Mark 1:35 & John 15:5-7

Things to Know

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Gospel Connections and Conversations

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*Studying God's Word **In Community***

Reminder: The goal of group time is not to re-preach the sermon, but to understand and apply God's Word together.

Sermon Recap

Mark 1:35 and John 15:5-7 reveal that prayer is not a performance but a relationship to abide in. Jesus, in the middle of a demanding ministry schedule, withdrew early in the morning to a solitary place to be with the Father. His fruitfulness flowed out of His communion, not the other way around. John 15 makes the connection explicit: apart from Christ we can do nothing, but those who abide in Him bear fruit and find their prayers shaped by His will. Time with God is not a task on the to-do list; it is the root system that makes everything else possible.

Read

Read Mark 1:35 and John 15:5-7 and make observations about the text.

- What is God teaching us in the passage?
 - What does this reveal about who God is, what God has done, and how I should respond?
 - Which part of the text was most meaningful to you and why?
 - What do you need help understanding about this passage?
-

Scripture

Mark 1:35

John 15:5-7

Jesus Preaches in Galilee

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

John 15:5-7

[5] I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. [6] If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. [7] If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (ESV)

Living on Mission In Community

Living on mission as a group means helping one another protect unhurried time with God in a culture that prizes constant motion. Jesus' example in Mark 1 shows that even the busiest ministry calendar must be built on the foundation of communion with the Father. As a group, we can ask one another honestly about our rhythms of prayer, encourage each other when distraction and busyness crowd it out, and remind one another that fruitfulness in mission always flows from abiding, not striving. A church that treasures time with God becomes a people who carry His presence into every space they enter.

How is God leading me to respond to His Word this week?

Optional Breakout Questions

Consider making time at the end of the group to break out into groups of 2-4 (keep them gender specific). Have them answer these three questions about their weeks:

1. How did you feed yourself?
 - *(What have you been doing to feed your spiritual life, and how is it going?)*
2. How did you feed others?
 - *(How did you share the gospel or gospel truth with someone this week?)*
3. How did you feed your flesh?
 - *(What sins did you struggle with this week? How can your friends hold you accountable?)*

Leader Resources- July 27- August 2

Small Group Curriculum - Mark 1:35 and John 15:5-7

1. Session Overview

This series begins with a posture of prayer. The main idea is cultivating time with God. Before Paul's armor of God can be picked up, before any spiritual discipline can bear fruit, believers must first understand that prayer is fundamentally about relationship. Mark 1:35 shows Jesus, at the height of public demand, withdrawing to a desolate place to pray before the sun had fully risen. He had just spent an evening healing the sick and casting out demons, and the crowds would be looking for Him again. Yet His first priority was not more ministry but more communion with His Father.

John 15:5-7 gives the theological foundation for why this matters. Jesus describes Himself as the vine and believers as branches. Fruitfulness is not the product of effort; it is the natural overflow of abiding. A branch does not strain to produce fruit, it simply stays connected to the vine, and the life of the vine does the rest. Prayer, then, is not primarily a request system. It is the means by which believers remain connected to the source of their life, and it is in that abiding relationship that God shapes our desires so our prayers increasingly align with His will.

2. Opening

Ask:

What tends to crowd out your time with God during a normal week?

When you hear the word "prayer," do you tend to think of it more as a duty or as a relationship? Why?

3. Scripture Reading

Have someone read Mark 1:35 and John 15:5-7 out loud.

4. Teaching Points (Systematic Walkthrough)

Mark 1:35 - Prayer Before Productivity

Mark places this verse immediately after one of the busiest days recorded in the Gospels. Jesus had taught in the synagogue, cast out an unclean spirit, healed Simon's mother-in-law, and then spent the evening healing and delivering people who gathered at the door until nightfall. By any human measure, He had earned rest. Instead, Mark tells us He rose "very early in the morning, while it was still dark" and withdrew to a desolate place to pray. This was not a one-time event but a pattern woven throughout Luke's Gospel as well, where Jesus regularly withdrew to pray, sometimes for an entire night. The timing matters. Jesus prioritized communion with the Father before the demands of the day could dictate His schedule. When Simon and the others found Him and told Him "everyone is looking for you," Jesus did not rush back to meet the crowd's expectations. His time in prayer had already clarified His mission: to preach, not merely to meet every felt need in one town. Prayer was not an escape from ministry; it was the source that directed it.

John 15:5-7 - Fruit Flows From Abiding

Where Mark 1:35 shows us Jesus' pattern, John 15 shows us why that pattern matters theologically. Jesus tells His disciples, "I am the vine; you are the branches." In first-century Israel, the vine was a familiar image, often used in the Old Testament to describe Israel itself, frequently as a vine that had failed to bear good fruit. Jesus reframes the image around Himself. He is the true vine, and apart from Him, His followers "can do nothing." This is a strong claim. Not "can do less" or "can do it with more difficulty," but can do nothing of lasting spiritual value. The remedy is not more effort but abiding, remaining in ongoing, dependent connection to Christ. Jesus then makes a striking promise: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." This is not a blank check disconnected from relationship. It is the natural result of a life so saturated in Christ's presence and word that our desires are increasingly shaped by His. Prayer, in this light, is less about convincing God to give us what we want and more about being so connected to Him that our wants are transformed.

5. Discussion Questions

1. What stands out to you most in Mark 1:35 and John 15:5-7?
2. Why do you think Jesus prioritized prayer even during His busiest seasons of ministry?
3. What does it look like practically to "abide" in Christ throughout a normal day?
4. How does understanding prayer as relationship rather than duty change the way you approach it?
5. What competes most for the time you would otherwise give to prayer?
6. How might a life of consistent prayer change the way you handle stress, decisions, or busyness?

6. Application

This week, identify one specific time in your daily schedule, even fifteen minutes, that you can protect for unhurried time with God. Before anything else fills that space, use it simply to be with Him: reading His Word, praying honestly, and listening.

Also consider: is there an area of your life where you have been striving in your own strength rather than abiding in Christ? Name it, and bring it to Him this week.

7. Closing Prayer

Prayer:

Father, teach us to treasure time with You above the demands of our schedules. Help us abide in Christ so that our lives bear real fruit, not from our own effort, but from Your life at work in us. In Jesus' name, amen.

8. Memory Verse

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

John 15:5





UPSTATE GROUP GUIDE

Prayer

August 3-9

Matthew 6: 5-13

Things to Know

See Other Sermons Here

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Gospel Connections and Conversations

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*Studying God's Word **In Community***

Reminder: The goal of group time is not to re-preach the sermon, but to understand and apply God's Word together.

Sermon Recap

Matthew 6:5-13 teaches that prayer is not about performance or empty repetition but about honest communion with a Father who already knows what we need. Jesus warns against praying to be seen by others or piling up meaningless words to manipulate God, and instead gives His disciples a model: the Lord's Prayer. In it, we see a pattern that moves from worship of who God is, to surrender to His kingdom and will, to honest dependence for our daily needs, forgiveness, and protection. How we pray reveals what we actually believe about God.

Read

Read Matthew 6:5-13 and make observations about the text.

- What is God teaching us in the passage?
 - What does this reveal about who God is, what God has done, and how I should respond?
 - Which part of the text was most meaningful to you and why?
 - What do you need help understanding about this passage?
-

Scripture

Matthew 6:5-13

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day 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 evil.’

[The Holy Bible, English Standard Version](#). ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Matthew 6:5-13.

Living on Mission In Community

Living on mission as a group means learning to pray honestly together rather than performing spiritual language for one another. Jesus warns against prayer that is more concerned with appearance than with genuine communion with God. As a group, we can create space where prayer is simple, honest, and unhurried, modeling for one another what it looks like to bring real needs to a Father who already knows them. A group that prays like Jesus taught becomes a

community marked by humility rather than performance, and dependence rather than self-sufficiency.

How is God leading me to respond to His Word this week?

Optional Breakout Questions

Consider making time at the end of the group to break out into groups of 2-4 (keep them gender specific). Have them answer these three questions about their weeks:

1. How did you feed yourself?
 - *(What have you been doing to feed your spiritual life, and how is it going?)*
2. How did you feed others?
 - *(How did you share the gospel or gospel truth with someone this week?)*
3. How did you feed your flesh?
 - *(What sins did you struggle with this week? How can your friends hold you accountable?)*

Leader Resources- August 3-9

Small Group Curriculum - Matthew 6:5-13

1. Session Overview

In Matthew 6, Jesus addresses two wrong approaches to prayer before giving His disciples the right one. The first wrong approach is prayer as performance, the hypocrite who prays loudly in public spaces to be admired for his apparent spirituality. The second is prayer as manipulation, the practice of heaping up empty, repetitive phrases as though God can be worn down or impressed by sheer volume of words. Jesus corrects both errors by pointing His disciples toward a Father who already knows what they need before they ask.

This should be freeing, not because prayer becomes unnecessary, but because it removes the pressure to perform or persuade. What follows is the Lord's Prayer, not a magic formula to be recited but a pattern that shapes how disciples ought to think and pray. It moves from worship, to surrender, to dependence, revealing what a healthy relationship with God actually looks like.

2. Opening

Ask:

Have you ever caught yourself praying more for how it sounded than what it meant?

When you were taught to pray growing up, what pattern or approach did you learn?

3. Scripture Reading

Have someone read Matthew 6:5-13 out loud.

4. Teaching Points (Systematic Walkthrough)

Matthew 6:5-8 – Two Wrong Ways to Pray

Jesus first confronts prayer as performance. The hypocrites He describes were known for praying in visible, public places specifically so others would notice their apparent devotion. Jesus says plainly that they have already received their reward: the admiration of onlookers, nothing more. In contrast, He instructs His disciples to pray in secret, where only the Father sees. This does not forbid public prayer altogether, Jesus Himself prayed publicly at other points in the Gospels, but it exposes the motive behind prayer. The question is not where we pray but who we are praying for the benefit of. Jesus then confronts a second error, prayer as manipulation through “empty phrases,” language that assumes God can be persuaded or worn down through sheer repetition or eloquence, as though prayer were primarily about technique. Jesus corrects this with a simple, staggering truth: “your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” This does not make prayer pointless, it makes prayer relational rather than transactional. We do not inform God of things He does not know; we commune with a Father who already cares.

Matthew 6:9-13 – The Pattern of the Lord’s Prayer

Jesus then gives His disciples a model, not a script to be mechanically repeated but a pattern that shapes the shape of all Christian prayer. It begins with worship: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” Before any request is made, God’s identity and holiness are acknowledged first. This reorients the one praying away from self-focus and toward who God actually is. Next comes surrender: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Disciples are taught to pray for God’s purposes to advance before their own preferences are voiced. Only after worship and surrender does the prayer turn to need: “Give us this day our daily bread,” a request for provision that is honest, present-tense, and dependent rather than anxious about tomorrow. The prayer continues with forgiveness, tying our own forgiveness of others directly to our posture before God, and closes with protection, asking God to guard us from temptation and deliver us from evil. The order itself is instructive. Genuine prayer begins with who God is, submits to what God wants, and only then brings our needs, because a heart shaped by worship approaches its requests very differently than a heart that begins with demand.

5. Discussion Questions

1. What stands out to you most in Matthew 6:5-13?
2. Why do you think Jesus addresses the motive behind prayer before teaching the content of prayer?
3. What does it mean that God “already knows what you need before you ask”? How should that change how we pray?
4. Why do you think the Lord’s Prayer begins with worship and surrender before it moves to personal requests?

5. Which part of the Lord's Prayer do you find easiest to pray? Which is hardest, and why?
6. What would it look like for your own prayer life to follow this pattern more consistently?

6. Application

This week, use the structure of the Lord's Prayer as a guide for your own prayer time each day: begin with worship, move to surrender, then bring your needs, your need for forgiveness, and your need for protection to God honestly.

Consider writing out your own prayer following this pattern, using your own words for each section, and pray it daily.

7. Closing Prayer

Prayer:

Father, teach us to pray as Jesus taught His disciples: with hearts set on worship, wills surrendered to Yours, and honest dependence on You for all we need. In Jesus' name, amen.

8. Memory Verse

"Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.'"

Matthew 6:9





UPSTATE GROUP GUIDE

Prayer

August 10-16

Luke 18:1-8

Things to Know

See Other Sermons Here

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Gospel Connections and Conversations

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*Studying God's Word **In Community***

Reminder: The goal of group time is not to re-preach the sermon, but to understand and apply God's Word together.

Sermon Recap

Luke 18:1-8 teaches that believers ought "always to pray and not lose heart." Jesus tells the parable of a persistent widow who wears down an unjust judge through sheer perseverance, then makes a "how much more" argument: if even an uninterested, unrighteous judge eventually gives justice, how much more will a good and loving Father respond to His own children who cry out to Him day and night? Persistent prayer is not about

convincing a reluctant God. It is the natural posture of faith that keeps trusting Him even when the answer is delayed.

Read

Read Luke 18:1-8 and make observations about the text.

- What is God teaching us in the passage?
 - What does this reveal about who God is, what God has done, and how I should respond?
 - Which part of the text was most meaningful to you and why?
 - What do you need help understanding about this passage?
-

Scripture

Luke 18:1-8

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, “Give me justice against my adversary.” For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, “Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.”’ And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’”

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Living on Mission In Community

Living on mission as a group means helping one another keep praying when answers are delayed and the temptation to lose heart grows strong. Jesus told this parable precisely because perseverance in prayer does not come naturally when circumstances are discouraging. As a group, we can carry each other's burdens by continuing to pray for one another's requests over time, refusing to give up on people or situations too quickly, and reminding one another that God is not an unjust judge who must be worn down, but a Father eager to act on behalf of His people. A church that prays persistently becomes a people marked by hope rather than discouragement.

How is God leading me to respond to His Word this week?

Optional Breakout Questions

Consider making time at the end of the group to break out into groups of 2-4 (keep them gender specific). Have them answer these three questions about their weeks:

1. How did you feed yourself?
 - *(What have you been doing to feed your spiritual life, and how is it going?)*
2. How did you feed others?
 - *(How did you share the gospel or gospel truth with someone this week?)*
3. How did you feed your flesh?
 - *(What sins did you struggle with this week? How can your friends hold you accountable?)*

Leader Resources- August 10-16

Small Group Curriculum - Luke 18:1-8

1. Session Overview

Luke tells us the purpose of this parable up front: Jesus told it so that His disciples “ought always to pray and not lose heart.” That framing matters, because without it, the parable could easily be misread as being about the judge rather than about God. The unjust judge is not a picture of God; he is the opposite of God. He neither fears God nor respects people, and he only grants the widow’s request because her persistence has become an annoyance he wants to be rid of. Jesus builds His argument from lesser to greater: if even a corrupt, self-interested judge can eventually be moved to act, how much more will a righteous, loving Father act on behalf of His own children who cry out to Him?

The parable is not designed to teach that God is reluctant and must be worn down. It is designed to teach that persistent prayer is not wasted, because it flows from confidence in a God who is nothing like the unjust judge. Jesus closes with a sobering question that ties persistence in prayer directly to enduring faith: when He returns, will He find that kind of faith still praying?

2. Opening

Ask:

Have you ever kept asking for something you needed until you finally got an answer? What kept you going?

What tends to make you want to give up on prayer when the answer doesn’t come quickly?

3. Scripture Reading

Have someone read Luke 18:1-8 out loud.

4. Teaching Points (Systematic Walkthrough)

Luke 18:1-5 - The Widow and the Unjust Judge

Jesus sets the scene with two characters who form a deliberate contrast. The judge “neither feared God nor respected man,” a description meant to show he was motivated by nothing beyond his own interest, not justice, not compassion, not even social pressure in the ordinary sense. The widow, by contrast, represents someone with no social power or leverage in that culture. Widows in the ancient world were among the most vulnerable, often without legal standing or resources to compel a ruling in their favor. Her only tool is persistence. She “kept coming to him,” repeatedly, over time, refusing to be dismissed. Eventually the judge relents, not because his character changed or because justice finally moved him, but because he wants relief from her continual coming. The Greek phrase behind “wear me out” carries the sense of being worn down or even given a black eye, a vivid image of how relentlessly this widow pursued justice. Jesus is not commending the judge. He is using an argument from the lesser to the greater: if a corrupt judge with no genuine concern for justice can be moved by persistence, how much more does a truly righteous and loving God respond to His people?

Luke 18:6-8 - God Is Not Like the Judge

Jesus makes His application explicit in verse 6: “Hear what the unrighteous judge says.” He then draws the contrast directly. Unlike the judge, God is not reluctant, uninterested, or slow to act out of indifference. He asks, “will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?” and answers His own question: “I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” This does not promise that every prayer will be answered on our preferred timeline, Scripture elsewhere shows God’s people waiting years, even generations, for promised justice and deliverance. Rather, it promises that God’s response is not built on reluctance the way the judge’s was. Delay from God is never indifference. Jesus closes the parable with a piercing question: “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” This connects persistent prayer directly to persevering faith. Losing heart in prayer is often, at its root, a symptom of losing confidence in who God is. Persistent prayer is not about convincing a hesitant God; it is the fruit of a faith that keeps trusting Him even when the timeline is unclear.

5. Discussion Questions

1. What stands out to you most in Luke 18:1-8?
2. Why do you think Jesus used an unjust judge, rather than a good one, to make His point about God?
3. What is the difference between persistent prayer that flows from faith and prayer that flows from doubt or anxiety?
4. Why do you think believers are tempted to lose heart when prayers aren't answered quickly?
5. How does Jesus' closing question about finding faith on earth connect persistence in prayer to the state of our faith?
6. What is a situation in your life right now where you need to keep praying and not lose heart?

6. Application

This week, identify a request you have prayed about before but stopped bringing to God because the answer was delayed or unclear. Recommit to bringing it to Him again, not because He needs to be convinced, but because persistent prayer reflects ongoing trust in His character.

Also consider journaling your prayers this week so you can look back and see God's faithfulness over time, even in the waiting.

7. Closing Prayer

Prayer:

Father, You are not like the unjust judge. You are good, You are near, and You hear us when we cry out to You. Help us not to lose heart, but to keep praying with faith that trusts Your timing and Your character. In Jesus' name, amen.

8. Memory Verse

"And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart."

Luke 18:1





UPSTATE GROUP GUIDE

Prayer

August 17-23

Luke 18: 9-14

Things to Know

See Other Sermons Here

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Gospel Connections and Conversations

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*Studying God's Word **In Community***

Reminder: The goal of group time is not to re-preach the sermon, but to understand and apply God's Word together.

Sermon Recap

Luke 18:9-14 contrasts two men who went to the temple to pray: a Pharisee confident in his own righteousness, and a tax collector who could only cry out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus says it is the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who went home justified. This parable teaches that prayer is not a platform for self-congratulation but a posture of humility. True repentance does not compare itself favorably to others; it simply casts itself on the mercy of God.

Read

Read Luke 18:9-14 and make observations about the text.

- What is God teaching us in the passage?
 - What does this reveal about who God is, what God has done, and how I should respond?
 - Which part of the text was most meaningful to you and why?
 - What do you need help understanding about this passage?
-

Scripture

Luke 18:9-14

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ‘Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.’”

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Living on Mission In Community

Living on mission as a group means creating a culture where honest confession is safe rather than something to hide behind spiritual performance. The Pharisee’s prayer reminds us how easily comparison and self-righteousness can creep into community, while the tax collector’s prayer shows what genuine humility before God sounds like. As a group, we can model honest confession with one another, refuse to compare our sin against someone else’s, and remind each other that our standing before God is never based on our performance but always on His mercy. A group marked by humility becomes a safe place for real transformation to happen.

Optional Breakout Questions

Consider making time at the end of the group to break out into groups of 2-4 (keep them gender specific). Have them answer these three questions about their weeks:

1. How did you feed yourself?
 - *(What have you been doing to feed your spiritual life, and how is it going?)*
2. How did you feed others?
 - *(How did you share the gospel or gospel truth with someone this week?)*
3. How did you feed your flesh?
 - *(What sins did you struggle with this week? How can your friends hold you accountable?)*

Leader Resources- August 17-23

Small Group Curriculum - Luke 18:9-14

1. Session Overview

Luke tells us exactly who Jesus aimed this parable at: “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” The parable features two men praying in the same temple but arriving with radically different postures. The Pharisee’s prayer is, on the surface, filled with religious language, thanksgiving, fasting, tithing, yet it is entirely self-referential. He thanks God, but the substance of his prayer is a list of his own accomplishments compared favorably against other people, particularly the tax collector standing nearby. The tax collector, by contrast, cannot even lift his eyes toward heaven. He offers no defense, no comparison, no résumé of good deeds.

His entire prayer is nine words: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus’ verdict overturns every expectation His audience would have had. The tax collector, a man whose profession made him a social and religious outcast for collaborating with Rome and often extorting his own people, went home justified. The Pharisee, outwardly righteous and religiously devoted, did not. The lesson is unmistakable: prayer that begins with self-righteousness cannot lead to justification, but prayer that begins with honest confession of sin is met with mercy.

2. Opening

Ask:

Have you ever caught yourself comparing your own spiritual life favorably to someone else’s?

Why do you think honest confession can feel so difficult, even in a safe environment?

3. Scripture Reading

Have someone read Luke 18:9-14 out loud.

4. Teaching Points (Systematic Walkthrough)

Luke 18:9-12 – The Prayer of the Pharisee

The Pharisee's prayer begins with the words "God, I thank you," which sounds appropriately humble on the surface. But everything that follows reveals the true posture of his heart. He thanks God that he is "not like other men," specifically naming extortioners, the unjust, adulterers, and pointedly, the tax collector standing nearby. His prayer is not actually directed toward God in dependence; it is a public accounting of his own righteousness, using God as an audience rather than approaching Him as a father. He goes on to list his religious performance: fasting twice a week, far beyond what the law required, and tithing on everything he acquires. None of these practices were wrong in themselves. The problem was not that the Pharisee fasted or tithed; the problem was that he trusted in those practices as the basis of his standing before God, and used them as a measuring stick to elevate himself over others.

Luke 18:13-14 – The Prayer of the Tax Collector

The tax collector's posture could not be more different. He stands "far off," likely away from the more prominent worshippers, aware of his social and spiritual standing. He will not even lift his eyes to heaven, a posture that communicates deep shame and humility. He beats his chest, an ancient expression of anguish and grief over sin. His prayer contains no comparison to anyone else, no résumé, no defense. It is simply, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." The Greek behind "be merciful" conveys a plea for atonement, asking God to be propitious toward him on the basis of sacrifice rather than personal merit. Jesus' verdict is startling to His original audience: this man, not the outwardly religious Pharisee, went home justified. Jesus closes with a principle that runs throughout Scripture: "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." This parable teaches believers that prayer is not a stage for showcasing spiritual performance. It is a place of honest reckoning with our need for mercy, a mercy that, through the gospel, has been fully provided in Christ.

5. Discussion Questions

1. What stands out to you most in Luke 18:9-14?
2. Why do you think the Pharisee's prayer, despite sounding religious, was not acceptable to God?
3. What made the tax collector's prayer different, both in content and posture?
4. Why is it so easy to slip into comparing our own righteousness to other people's, even unintentionally?
5. What is the difference between conviction that leads to humble confession and shame that leads to hiding?
6. What would it look like for you to pray more like the tax collector this week?

6. Application

This week, take time to examine your own heart honestly before God, without comparing yourself to anyone else. Confess specific sin to Him plainly, resisting the urge to soften or justify it, and receive His mercy as it is offered through Christ, freely and completely.

Consider whether there is someone you have quietly looked down on spiritually, and ask God to replace that posture with humility and compassion.

7. Closing Prayer

Prayer:

Father, we confess that we are often more like the Pharisee than we want to admit. Teach us to come to You honestly, without comparison or pretense, trusting only in Your mercy through Christ. In Jesus' name, amen.

8. Memory Verse

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”
Luke 18:14





UPSTATE GROUP GUIDE

Prayer

August 24-30

James 5:13-20

Things to Know

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Gospel Connections and Conversations

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*Studying God's Word **In Community***

Reminder: The goal of group time is not to re-preach the sermon, but to understand and apply God's Word together.

Sermon Recap

James 5:13-20 closes his letter with a call for the church to be a praying community, in suffering, in sickness, in sin, and in wandering. James points to the prayer of a righteous person as having great power, and holds up Elijah, a man with a nature like ours, as proof that ordinary believers' prayers accomplish extraordinary things. He closes with a call to pursue one another when we wander from the truth, because bringing a wandering brother or

sister back covers a multitude of sins. Prayer, in James's vision, is never meant to be a private, individual practice alone. It is the lifeblood of a caring community.

Read

Read James 5:13-20 and make observations about the text.

- What is God teaching us in the passage?
 - What does this reveal about who God is, what God has done, and how I should respond?
 - Which part of the text was most meaningful to you and why?
 - What do you need help understanding about this passage?
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Scripture

James 5:13-20

"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

[The Holy Bible, English Standard Version](#). ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Ephesians 6:16.

Living on Mission In Community

Living on mission as a group means becoming a people marked by prayer for one another in every season, suffering, joy, sickness, sin, and wandering. James envisions a church where no one carries their burdens alone, where confession is met with prayer rather than judgment, and where wandering believers are pursued rather than written off. As a group, we can practice this by being honest about our struggles, praying specifically and consistently for each other, and taking the risk of pursuing someone who is drifting from the faith. A group that prays for one another this way becomes a picture of the gospel itself, people who could not save themselves, brought back by relentless love.

How is God leading me to respond to His Word this week?

Optional Breakout Questions

Consider making time at the end of the group to break out into groups of 2-4 (keep them gender specific). Have them answer these three questions about their weeks:

1. How did you feed yourself?
 - *(What have you been doing to feed your spiritual life, and how is it going?)*
2. How did you feed others?
 - *(How did you share the gospel or gospel truth with someone this week?)*
3. How did you feed your flesh?
 - *(What sins did you struggle with this week? How can your friends hold you accountable?)*

Leader Resources-August 24-30

Small Group Curriculum - James 5:13-20

1. Session Overview

James closes his letter with a passage that moves prayer from a private discipline into a communal practice woven through every season of life. He addresses suffering, cheerfulness, sickness, and sin, and in each case the response is the same: turn to prayer, and turn to one another. Verses 14 and 15 specifically address physical sickness, instructing the sick to call for the church's elders to pray over them, a picture of a congregation that carries its members' physical suffering together rather than leaving anyone to face it alone. James then broadens the call: "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed," linking honest confession within community directly to spiritual wholeness. To prove that ordinary believers' prayers matter, James points to Elijah, not as a superhuman prophet but explicitly as "a man with a nature like ours," whose fervent prayer altered the weather patterns of a nation for years. James closes with a final charge: pursue those who wander from the truth, because bringing someone back from spiritual drift is an act that saves a soul from death. The whole passage paints a picture of a church that prays for one another relentlessly, in sickness, in confession, and in wandering.

2. Opening

Ask:

Who is someone who has faithfully prayed for you during a hard season? What did that mean to you?

Why do you think confession and prayer are so closely tied together in this passage?

3. Scripture Reading

Have someone read James 5:13-20 out loud.

4. Teaching Points (Systematic Walkthrough)

James 5:13-16

James begins with a rhythm that covers the full range of human experience: suffering calls for prayer, cheerfulness calls for praise, sickness calls for the prayers of the elders. This is significant because it refuses to compartmentalize prayer as something reserved only for crisis. Every emotional and physical state has a corresponding response rooted in communication with God. The instruction regarding sickness is specific and communal: the sick person is to call for the elders, who pray over them and anoint them with oil, a practice that in the ancient world carried both medicinal and symbolic significance, representing the Spirit's presence and God's care. James ties healing to "the prayer of faith," not as a formula that guarantees a particular outcome every time, but as an expression of dependent trust placed in God's hands. He then widens the circle beyond sickness to sin: "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." This instruction assumes a level of vulnerability and trust within the church that runs counter to our natural instinct to hide sin. James connects confession directly to healing, suggesting that unconfessed sin carries a weight, relational and spiritual, that honest confession within community begins to lift.

James 5:17-20

To demonstrate that "the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working," James points not to an idealized superhero of faith but to Elijah, explicitly described as "a man with a nature like ours." This detail matters enormously. Elijah was capable of fear, discouragement, and even despair, as seen elsewhere in his story, yet his fervent prayer withheld rain from the land for three and a half years, and his prayer again brought it back. James's point is not that all believers can control weather patterns, but that ordinary, flawed people whose prayers are aligned with God's purposes can accomplish extraordinary things through prayer. This is deeply encouraging for believers who feel their prayers are too small or too ordinary to matter. James closes his letter, strikingly, not with a benediction but with a call to action: pursue those who wander from the truth. He does not treat spiritual drift as someone else's problem or as something to quietly observe from a distance. Bringing a wandering brother or sister back "will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." This final charge reframes the entire letter's emphasis on genuine faith that produces action: a church that prays for one another will also pursue one another, refusing to let anyone drift away unnoticed.

5. Discussion Questions

1. What stands out to you most in James 5:13-20?
2. Why do you think James connects prayer to every season of life rather than only to crisis moments?
3. What makes confession to one another difficult, and what would it take for this to grow as a group?
4. Why is it significant that James describes Elijah as "a man with a nature like ours"?
5. What does it look like practically to "pursue" someone who is wandering from the truth without pushing them further away?
6. Who is someone in your life right now who needs your consistent prayer or your pursuit?

6. Application

This week, identify someone in your group or circle of relationships who is suffering, struggling with sin, or drifting spiritually. Commit to praying for them specifically and consistently, and consider reaching out to them directly rather than praying from a distance.

Also consider: Is there sin you have been carrying alone that you need to confess to a trusted brother or sister this week? Take the step of bringing it into the light.

7. Closing Prayer

Prayer:

Father, make us a people who pray for one another in every season, who confess honestly, and who pursue those who wander. Thank You that ordinary prayers, offered in faith, accomplish extraordinary things in Your hands. In Jesus' name, amen.

8. Memory Verse

"The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."

James 5:16

