

PRAYER

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 18:23–33;
Exodus 32:31–32;
Nehemiah 1:4–11; Daniel 6:10;
Matthew 6:5–15;
Luke 18:1–14;
John 17:1–26; 1 Thessalonians 5:17;
1 John 5:14–15

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

“I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”
(Luke 18:14)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Jan. 12	Jas. 1:2–8	Praying for Wisdom
T	Jan. 13	Jer. 29:10–14	Praying and Seeking God
W	Jan. 14	Phil. 4:4–9	Praying with Thanksgiving
Th	Jan. 15	Ps. 61	Praying for Protection
F	Jan. 16	Matt. 6:5–15	Praying as Jesus Taught
Sa	Jan. 17	Gen. 18:23–33	Praying for Others

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

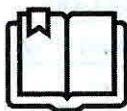
Does the idea of someone asking you to pray aloud, at a meal or gathering, fill you with fear and trembling? Do you sit down to pray and worry that you aren’t doing it right? Maybe the words don’t flow, or your mind wanders. Or maybe you have a rich and satisfying prayer life—one where you feel like you and God deeply connect and converse. Or perhaps, like most people, your prayer life has changed over time—sometimes full and flowing, and sometimes dry and empty, and often somewhere in between.

Think about how and when you learned to pray. Some of us learned mealtime or bedtime prayers to recite by heart during childhood, or were taught prayers in Sunday School, worship, or another group setting. Some of us learned by watching someone we love say their own prayers, or we have a favorite prayerbook with beautiful words written by generations past or pray-ers present. Some of us have learned to pray out of desperation and need. All of us have more to learn about prayer; Scripture and our faith tradition are excellent teachers.

At its most basic level, prayer is simply talking with God. We bring our whole selves and our concerns before our Creator, who knows us inside and out, and we listen for God’s response. Our prayers might be scripted, sung, or silent. We pray alone and with others, praying for ourselves and for

others. In our prayers, we offer to God praise and thanksgiving; we confess our sin and seek forgiveness; we share the deepest desires of our hearts and the needs of our neighbors and world. We trust that God hears our prayers and responds in loving, just, and compassionate ways.

God of all, may the words we speak and the thoughts we ponder in this time together be grounded in you. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Genesis 18:25–27; Luke 18:9–14; 1 John 5:14–15

18:25 Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” ²⁶And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” ²⁷Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to my lord, I who am but dust and ashes.

18:9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

5:14 And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.

GOD HEARS US

A recurring theme in Luke’s Gospel is what we learn about a prayer from Jesus’ words and witness. Jesus prays often in significant moments in his ministry (Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18,

28–29; 22:39–45; 23:34, 46). Jesus teaches about prayer (Luke 6:28; 11:1–13; 18:9–14; 19:46; 20:47; 22:40, 46). In consecutive stories in Luke 18, we learn to pray with persistence and humility.

In 18:1–8, we meet a widow—connecting with Lukan themes of economic justice and care for widows and orphans—whose faith gives her the boldness to ask repeatedly for justice. Does she wear the judge down, or does she trust that her tireless cries are not unheard? Perhaps her actions boil down to her trust not in the judge but in God’s attribute of hearing and responding to the cries of God’s people? Jesus says that God grants justice to those who “cry to him day and night.” This story shows us the need to “pray always and not to lose heart.” The patriarchs, prophets, and psalmists of the Old Testament give us repeated examples of prayers and conversations with God rooted in the trust that God hears us.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14 goes a step further to show that the content and stance of our prayers matter. Both pray-ers begin with an address to God. The Pharisee immediately turns to the subject of himself, thanking God for his own virtue, assuming he is not a sinner like those around him. He asks nothing of God, as if he doesn’t need God’s help. He stands alone, sure that he is singular in his devotion and righteousness. In contrast, the tax collector stands far off, sure of his own sinfulness, and asks for mercy. His prayer is not about his own virtue, but rather about his need for God. Jesus teaches that it is humility that God hears, rather than self-promotion, even if it is couched in the language of thanksgiving.

Jesus says in Luke 5:32: “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” We’ve already seen that there is “more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (15:7) Our boldness in praying—even for mercy in our sinfulness—is heard by God who responds with grace. We learn that “this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him” (1 John 5:14–15).

② What is the content and stance of your prayers today?

SHAPED BY THE PRIORITIES OF GOD

stance of humility in prayer helps us push back against a tendency to see prayer as a transactional endeavor. We ask for what we need, knowing that whatever happens next—and always—flows from God's grace as a result of God's will. We may read some Scripture and think or hope that prayer changes God—God's mind, God's attention, God's priorities. Yet primarily, prayer changes us. We learn to frame our prayers “in the name of Jesus” and through the lens of the priorities of God. The more we pray with humility, the more our prayers help form us in the ways of God. Prayer, then, is less about getting or ensuring something, and more about becoming something or someone—in a relationship with God who hears and responds, so that the future God intends comes closer.

In Matthew 6, Jesus echoes the lesson of our Lukan parable that prayer is not for the benefit of showing others (even God) our righteousness. Prayer is to be entered into humbly, privately, and in full trust that God knows our needs even before we know them ourselves. Wrapping our requests in fancy words or phrases doesn't make them more likely to be heard or answered. Rather, speaking plainly when we can and wordlessly when we must, with what we know of the priorities of God shaping our intentions, we pray. We might ask: how do we know the priorities of God? A Bible study like this one, on the essentials of the Christian faith, is a good start to discerning them. Continued worship, study, and prayer remind us that we have more to learn.

Even those who knew Jesus best wondered about how to pray. Jesus responds with a model to follow in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13). It is a prayer not of a singular righteous individual but of one who comes to God as part of a community. We pray to *our* Father, ask humbly for *our* daily bread, for *our* debts and trespasses to be forgiven, and *our* collective rescue from trials and temptations. These are bold requests from a position of humility, but also from a trusting knowledge of God. Like Abraham asking a just and righteous God to spare a city, the requests align with what we already know of the character of God. As we pray, we remind ourselves of who God is and how God acts—with providence, forgiveness, and rescue not just for us, but for all of creation.

② In plain language, what do you understand are the priorities of God? How can these shape your prayers today?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Prayer is never an isolated moment of faith. Our prayers link us with the past, help us define our present, and propel us into a future with God and with each other.

The day on which you read this is my birthday. As a cancer survivor and a bereaved mother, I know that birthdays are not a given. I've had moments of prayer that felt more desperate than devotional. You likely have, too. Yet even when I couldn't pray myself, I felt the prayers of others on my behalf. Those past prayers of mine, and those for me, shape my prayers today. Even now I am praying for friends in treatment or in grief—bold to pray for health and healing, and humbled that God's will for wholeness is bigger than my understanding.

I type this a few days before a U.S. presidential election. Prayers are offered publicly and privately for both major candidates and for a future when they assume leadership. People of faith on both sides are mystified by those on the other side. We might couch our prayers around the election from a sense that we have the priorities of God in mind, but our understanding and interpretation of God's priorities are not all the same. This is not new. This Sunday in January is also Martin Luther King Jr. weekend in the U.S. His prayers came in a time when the civil rights movement found people of faith on opposite sides of an issue that was about more than voting rights. The priorities of God revealed during that time for justice, righteousness, and human flourishing may look clearer to some of us now, but the same forces that prayed and protested against them are still at work.

So how do we pray today, knowing that we might be seeing the world and praying in a way that other siblings in faith or even ourselves might find mystifying in the future? I find a helpful word from Jill Crainshaw, who describes the “prayerful word-work we do to draw age-old gospel promises together with the aches and wonders of our contemporary doubts and beliefs.”¹ She calls it “wrinkling time” or “anamnesis” which means “in remembrance.” In anamnesis, we remember the gifts and pains of the past and mix them together with the fears and hopes for the future, and pray in the faithful, Spirit-filled possibilities of the present. God’s people have always prayed this way, boldly and in humility. We keep asking, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Then we talk to God. We listen. And we trust.

1. Jill Y. Crainshaw, *The Writing Work of the People: Liturgical Writing as Spiritual, Theological, and Prophetic Work* (New York: Church Publishing, 2021), 39–40.



What prayer will you pray today, as you wrinkle time?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Luke 18:1, 9 frame the reason for the parables (18:2–14). The Pharisee's prayer offers a negative example of prayer—praying from a sense of trusting in one's righteousness leads to regarding others with contempt. "Like the Pharisee, we are prone to self-righteous presumption. We all too easily think of ourselves as 'being on the right side of history,' as those who can be assured of future praise and vindication. In the assumption of our own justice, we can become like those to whom this parable was addressed, persons 'who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.'"²
2. In an essay, Nora Gallagher recounts this story: "One hundred and fifty scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project signed petitions to President Truman the summer of 1945 to try to stop him from dropping the bomb on Japan. They were present-day Abrahams, if you will, arguing against the use of a weapon which they called 'a means for the ruthless annihilation of cities.' They went on to say in one petition: 'Our use of atomic bombs in this war would carry the world a long way further on this path of ruthlessness.' . . . The value of one single, particular human life guards against the vilification of a whole nation, a group, a race, a tribe. It forces each of us to confront the part of us that wants to reduce the value of another in order to destroy them."³
3. Genesis 18:22–33 follows the announcement of Sarah's pending pregnancy and God's continuing fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12; 15). On receiving knowledge of Sodom's impending destruction, Abraham prays, negotiating on behalf of the righteous persons in Sodom. He appeals to God's promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham's descendants (12:3). God's inner dialogue (18:17–19) recalls that Abraham has been chosen (literally, "known") so that his descendants will keep God's way to do justice and righteousness. The themes of justice and righteousness become an important reason why Abraham intercedes to God the way he does.