

40 DAYS *in prayer*

AN MJ FAMILY PRAYER GUIDE

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There are countless people to thank for this project. Special thanks goes to all of our authors who worked hard and studied to create their entries. You can find them named at the bottom of their pages. Thanks go to Mikayla Keopf for her photography on the front cover. Much praise should be given to Becky Dotson who was diligent and thorough through the editing process. We thank Bryan LeMasters, Blaine McKinney, and the rest of the ministry staff for their work on this project. It has been a blessing to see so many work together to produce this resource.

40 Days in Prayer: An MJ Family Prayer Guide

2020 Mt. Juliet Church of Christ

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How To Use This Prayer Guide

Prayer is a powerful connection to God. Our Savior prayed often and also called His followers to do the same. Whether you're new to faith in Him or have been a disciple for many years, this book is designed for you. We formatted this book to help you build new prayer habits and grow in your relationship with God by intentionally focusing on prayer for 40 days. You'll notice that each day of the week focuses on a theme which you can see below. We encourage you to begin your day or find time during lunch to participate in this prayer guide. You'll want enough time to look up Scriptures, take notes and pray. We're excited you're joining us in this journey as God transforms His people through the discipline of prayer.



MONDAY: "TEACH US TO PRAY" – As it's easy to bring assumptions to prayer, Mondays will focus on understanding what is taught about prayer in Scripture.



TUESDAY: SERMON ON THE MOUNT – Jesus' Sermon on the Mount describes how his disciples are called to live. Each Tuesday will focus on a different passage from Matthew 5-7.



WEDNESDAY: OUR CHURCH FAMILY – Christians are called to pray for one another. Each Wednesday will focus on praying for one another.



THURSDAY: IN THE COMMUNITY – A healthy prayer life opens our hearts to opportunities around us. These days will be focus on living out and sharing the Gospel.



FRIDAY: PRAYING SCRIPTURE – The Bible not only teaches about and contains prayer, but it can also be used to guide our prayers.



SATURDAY: BLESSINGS – God's blessings go beyond our good and bad days. Saturdays will focus on various blessings we have because of our Creator.



SUNDAY: PRAYER JOURNALING – Taking the time to reflect and write out our prayers can be a healthy way for us to seek God through prayer.

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The Model Prayer

Can you imagine spending a couple of years with Jesus like the apostles? Think about all you would have seen: feeding the 5,000, healing the ten lepers, raising a little girl from the dead, casting out demons from a man who lived in a cemetery, showing grace to a woman caught in adultery, and hearing the sermon of all sermons – the Sermon on the Mount. What an amazing time in their lives.

One thing that stands out to me is the only thing the Bible tells us the disciples ever specifically asked their Rabbi, Jesus, to teach them was how to pray? They didn't ask Jesus to teach them how to heal, or cast out demons, or how to preach: just "Lord, teach us to pray."

Why would they ask? Because prayer is one of the foundations of the life of a disciple and bears extreme importance. Jesus' lesson on prayer is given in **Matthew 6:5-15** and **Luke 11:1-4**.

Matthew 6:9-13 – "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.'"

Jesus' prayer lesson was not a prayer of exact words to be memorized and prayed over and over, even though there is nothing wrong with memorizing and speaking this prayer word for word. What Jesus gave them was a prayer filled with specific focuses and themes that can be individualized to us as we go before the throne of God in prayer.

Jesus opens our eyes and heart through prayer so we not only know of His presence, but we can feel His presence in our lives.

When we pray:

1. We see God as our Father who is present and loves us.
2. We see God as sovereign as we worship through prayer and sanctify His name.
3. We see God's kingdom and purpose as we pray God's will be done.
4. We see God's provision as we ask and thank Him for taking care of our needs day by day.
5. We see God's mercy and grace as we confess our sins with His promise of forgiveness.
6. We see God's command to extend forgiveness to others as He has forgiven us.
7. We see God's protection as we ask Him to protect us from temptation and from evil in this world.

Jesus' lesson on prayer is not only for a band of disciples 2,000 years ago, but for us today. As we pray, we grow in love and knowledge of the God whose power and love washes over us each today.

Today read Jesus' lesson on prayer in **Matthew 6:5-15** and **Luke 11:1-4** and go before the throne of God in prayer, speaking through each focus and making it real to the situations of your life. God is listening and wants to hear from you.



Matthew 6:19-24 – Treasures

“If only I had...” Most of us have finished this sentence several different ways during our lives. It is normal for humankind to aspire and dream, but sometimes we can catch ourselves wishing for things that haven’t been intended for us to receive yet. Perhaps some of the most common wants we have are things that seem to come easier for others.

Imagine how God must feel when He hears us cry out for unnecessary things or things that we just simply “want.” Are we showing God our lack of appreciation for what He gives us when we keep praying for things we do not need?

Treasure comes in so many ways from God. For some, it could be good health and for others, perhaps, it is prosperity, wisdom, love, patience, or even understanding. There are so many blessings only God can give. We are taught about them throughout Scripture.

In **Matthew 6:19-24**, Jesus explains the blessing of what it means to have a right relationship with God and the infinite treasure we can have as a result of that devotion. In chapter 6, Jesus echo’s the word of the Father eleven times. He emphasizes to us that our greatest treasure is in *Him* and if we set our minds and hearts on *Him*, we will have blessings that can’t be measured.

Matthew 6:19-24 – *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”*

Did you notice Jesus begins by telling us that any worldly wishes will ultimately end up corroded by moths, rust, or even stolen by thieves? But if we set our sights on eternal things, those will endure forever! Jesus tells us beginning in verse 22 how dangerous our eyes can be when we envy or desire shiny things. Rather, if we seek to invest ourselves in loving and worshipping our Savior, loving others, caring, giving, praying, and celebrating the joy God blesses us with, then our purpose is far more meaningful and will never corrode.

Isn’t it amazing that God sent His Son to perish for our shortcomings? He loves you that much! Isn’t it incredible He freely gives this to all that will seek Him regardless of the sins we have committed?

When we pause our busy lives enough to reflect on the blessings He has given us and share those with everyone around us, He continues to bless us continuously. One of the greatest ways to escape this vain world and focus on our eternal treasure is to immerse ourselves in the deepest possible prayer life.

Blessings to you – and know you are loved. Today, make a list of some of the spiritual, eternal treasures God has given you. Take time to thank God for these in prayer. As you think of more throughout the day, take moments to pause and thank Him for them.



A Prayer for Those at Home

Intentional, let's be intentional when praying for those at home! When we think of those at home, our earthly dwelling place, we think about our family - children, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, and grandparents. It is important to remember those in our immediate family, but it is also important to remember the precious souls of our extended church family who reside in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, or are confined to their own homes. We know from **1 Corinthians 12:12-13** that in Christ we are one body with many members. We come from all walks and stages of life, but all with a common need to continue to grow closer to God and grow spiritually stronger every day.

Growing spiritually stronger every day is an awesome goal and certainly worthy of praying to God for guidance and direction in our lives, and in the lives of the many members of our body - our church family. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, we have and are experiencing a significant change in our normal routines. Part of that change has resulted in isolation of our church family, and isolation for those in nursing homes and assisted living.

The Apostle Paul shows us a powerful example of the need for spiritual growth and sharing spiritual gifts in **Romans 1:10-12**:
“always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.”

This is beautiful and so very appropriate. We need to pray for God's guidance in our lives. Pray we will appreciate and value coming together to study God's word, sing praises and make a joyful noise praising God Almighty. These are spiritual gifts that will sustain, encourage, and help us grow closer to God and to one another.

Please accept the challenge to reach out to our members in nursing homes or assisted living, or just folks you love and have not seen in a while. How can we know exactly what to pray for if we don't have involvement in the lives of those at home and communicate our ups and downs, our cares and concerns? Please make the opportunity to pray for and with them. Pray we will remain faithful, especially in times of isolation.

Make an opportunity to write down what is on your heart and mind, share it with your family, and ask for their prayers. Write down what is on their hearts and minds and make time to pray together. When Christ is at the center of our earthly dwelling place we are on the right track. **2 Corinthians 5:1-5** tells us our earthly dwelling places are as tents, but God has prepared a heavenly dwelling place that is eternal and we can strive in faith to get there together!



Praying for Our Public Servants

Stop and consider for a moment the public servants who affect your life and your community every day. Unfortunately, they often go unnoticed as they diligently work in the background, maintaining our community. Police officers and firefighters respond to emergencies we often never think of. They show up to serve in some of the most crucial circumstances – from missing children to unimaginable car accidents. EMS first responders, doctors, and nurses dedicate each day to help those who are sick, hurting or in danger. Our military service members serve our community, our country, and often other places in the world.

What does God say about those who live out their lives and livelihood to serve others? Jesus simplified God's law in this way – love God with your all, and love and serve others.

Matthew 22:36-40 – “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and Prophets.”

As Jesus walked this earth, he would continually and constantly be looking for ways to serve – from healing others from leprosy to washing the stinky feet of his disciples (**Luke 17:11-14; John 13:12-14**). He would touch those whom others would not go near (**Luke 5:12-13**). He would have a conversation with someone others had shun because of their race, ethnicity, or gender (**John 4:7-10**). He would reach out to public servants who were in desperate need of His grace (**Luke 19:1-7**).

Throughout the Bible, we see God is intent on His people helping those who need help the most. He administers justice for the orphans and widows and loves the sojourner (**Deuteronomy 10:18**). In the book of Proverbs, God tells us to speak out for the poor and needy (**Proverbs 31:9**).

Jesus reminds us the greatest among us will be a servant.

Matthew 23:11-12 – “The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

What an amazing blessing it is to have those who have dedicated their lives and careers to serving others. As we consider our prayer life, let us pray today and regularly for these public servants. Our prayers can provide much help as these servants carry out their mission (**James 5:16**).

Today, as we pray for our public servants:

- » Pray for their safety as they regularly put themselves in harm's way.
- » Pray for wisdom as they frequently have difficult decisions to make.
- » Pray for their endurance, because their path is tiresome and sometimes discouraging.
- » Pray for quickness of mind, as they often must make quick decisions, some even in the blink of an eye.
- » Pray for their families who support them, give them confidence, and carry a share of the load.
- » Thank God for appointing such individuals to help and serve us (**Romans 13:1-4**).



Using Scripture in Prayer

There are numerous songs that have guided faithful followers of Jesus into a deeper praise and worship of God. Pause for a moment to think of song lyrics that move you. For me, “I need Thee every hour...”, “His wounds have paid my ransom...”, and “...He is our God, the great I Am” are examples of lyrics that greatly help me to humble myself before God and truly exalt Him.

Just as written songs by others help us in our singing, Scripture can be a huge blessing in aiding us in our prayers. It too can move our hearts into a deeper praise and appreciation of God.

During our **40 Days in Prayer**, each Friday will focus on using Scripture as a guide to prayer. This exercise is called “praying Scripture.” This includes both prayers that are recorded throughout the Word by followers of God and texts that can and should be prayed.

As you pray Scripture, focus in on phrases or words that stand out to you. Also allow the theme of the text to guide your thoughts. Do not feel pressured to quote the passage as is, but use it as a springboard for you to express your emotions, faith, and praise.

Consider the following verses in light of using Scripture as part of your communion with God:

Psalm 119:11 – “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.”

Psalm 119:15-16 – “I will mediate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.”

John 15:7 – “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

Psalm 37:31 – “The law of His God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.”

Did you notice the high value placed on knowing Scripture and having it on your heart? That is the goal of praying Scripture – to mediate, delight, and abide in the Word.

For today, read the following Psalms. Dwell for a moment on their thoughts and exaltation of God. Then pick one to use as a guide for your prayer.

Psalm 18:1-3, 6 – “I love you, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. 6 In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.”

Psalm 18:27-32 – “For you save a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down. For it is you who light my lamp; the LORD my God lightens my darkness. For by you I can run against a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall. This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him. For who is God, but the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God?— the God who equipped me with strength and made my way blameless.”

Psalm 19:14 – “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.”

Psalm 31:1-5 – “In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me! Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me! For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name’s sake you lead me and guide me; you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.”



Spiritual Blessings

Let's consider these verses from Ephesians as we reflect and pray for our spiritual blessings:

Ephesians 1:3-14 – *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*

This first passage in Ephesians is the “gold standard” when speaking about the spiritual blessings offered by God to His children. We are given a “grocery list” (not to be confused with the “Fruit” of the Spirit in **Galatians 5:22**) of the blessings in which God bestows on us. As we read this passage, something else stands out, but when we dwell on the actual blessings, sometimes we overlook the grandeur with which they are each described.

The Holy Spirit could have inspired Paul to simply articulate the blessings with all the adjectives or contextual references, and we would still recognize the blessings we have are the greatest among His creation, but He did not just do that. We learn something about God's character, His love and our value in His eyes when we read this passage.

Imagine sitting amongst a group of fellow believers in Ephesus, who like you are poor, even beggars, by worldly measure, hearing a letter from the Apostle Paul being read and telling you of the grandeur of the gifts which your Heavenly Father has given you and which you can enjoy even now and look forward to in eternity. Chill bumps and tears would be plentiful among us!

Perhaps in our relative wealth, we are much more challenged to recognize the power of Paul's message to this group of Christians who were deprived of wealth and luxuries. Take note of the ways in which our blessings are described, and shown in bold type in the included passage above.

In verse 3, we are given EVERY spiritual blessing in the HEAVENLY places! “Every” is like the word “All” – it doesn't leave anything out! In verses 4 and 5 God, Himself, picked us BEFORE He created the world. We weren't an afterthought when the original plan didn't work out... we are THE plan. He makes room for us at His table through adoption... making us His own. We are the purpose of His will and the “praise of His glorious grace.” Through our adoption, we have been given an inheritance and it's guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, through whose promise we have been sealed! He has LAVISHED us and shared with us the MYSTERY of HIS WILL!

May we all pray to hear these words with the same fervor and amazement as the first group of Christians who heard of it, as Paul's letter was read. Pray we may all see the glory of the spiritual blessings, which are given to us and recognize the wealth beyond measure, which God has given us. Finally, through our words and actions, may others see the assurance we have from God, our Father, and be drawn in, so the wealth of spiritual blessings may be shared to those whose hearts are prepared to hear of and come to know Jesus, our Christ.



Your Spiritual Goals

Today, write down three specific spiritual goals you would like to accomplish in your life. Under each goal, note a game plan with specific times, steps and reasons why you want to accomplish these goals in your prayer life.

Write a specific prayer for each of these goals and find an accountable way to accomplish at least one of these.

Set a reminder on your phone or mark your calendar six months from now to refer to this page number and review your progress.



Why Pray?

I grew up in a very small country town in Illinois. The town was centered around a farming community, so you can imagine it was filled with large vast fields of corn and soybeans bordered by country roads. If you could fly over it, it would look like a bunch of squares and rectangles surrounding a small community of houses.

Along each of those roads would be different landmarks that would typically be known only to the local people and commonly used for directions. For example, corn silos, a dairy farm, and houses for local residents that everyone could name.

An old, abandoned schoolhouse where my mom attended elementary was also used as a landmark for directions. It was near my grandmother's house, and my sister would occasionally ask to drive by it and have my mom would tell stories about her childhood. We typically never passed by it on the way to my grandmother's because it was considered "out of the way." But sometimes, my parents would take that route, because in the end, we would always arrive at our destination - grandma's house.

You may be thinking right now how does this have anything to do with prayer? Well, over the years, I have heard many times, "The will of the Lord will always be done, so it makes no difference if I pray or not." Yes, it is true, the will of the Lord will always be accomplished and there is no changing it. However, the statement that there is nothing we can do about it, I believe, is completely inaccurate. You see, God can accomplish His will by taking a different path, just like when my sister asked my parents to go a different way.

God wants to hear from us. He wants us to tell Him what we are thinking, what matters to us, how we are feeling, and any requests we have. When we read in **Luke 22:42** where Jesus prayed in the garden saying, "*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.*" I truly believe if God could have done it differently, He would have. If Jesus did not believe this, then you have to ask yourself why He even asked in the first place?

You see, God does listen to us and He does care.

So why pray?

1. Because our prayers do matter (**Mark 9:14–29**).

Mark 9:28–29 - *"And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out?' And he said to them, 'This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.'"*

2. Because our prayers affect change in our lives.

Matthew 7:7–8 - *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."*

3. Because prayers have great power and accomplish much.

James 5:16 - *"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."*

If our final destination is to live forever with God, then He will guide our paths to reach it. Today, focus on praying for guidance knowing He will give it (**Mark 11:24**).



Matthew 6:25-34 – Worry

Are you worrying about your health? Maybe it is a change in your employment status, or your finances. Could it be a relationship issue with family or friends?

Worry does not change ANYTHING but trusting in God changes EVERYTHING. Have you noticed our worries are about things of this world? Our heavenly Father wants us to be concerned about the physical, but not depend on it for spiritual peace and happiness.

The message in **Matthew 6:25-34** about being anxious comes from Jesus as He encouraged His disciples to do three things:

1. Look up and learn
2. Be content
3. Seek first the kingdom of God

The message is to **look up and learn**. **Matthew 6:26** says “*Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*”

God created both birds and man. Who do you think He loves more? If He takes care of the fowls of the air, He will take care of you. Don't worry! This is where you can show your faith, by believing God can and that He will.

A valuable lesson Jesus taught about worry is centered around the idea of **being content**. **Matthew 6:27** tells us “*And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?*”

Our length of life and our time for dying is in God's hands and His alone. Worrying is not going to extend life. He wants us to believe and live with this truth. God is in charge. Knowing that we will die, is far more important than when or how. Preparing for death is how we should be living, not worrying about the physical life.

Hebrews 9:27 says “*And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.*” This premise should be our guide for living. Being prepared to “die in the Lord” should remove any worries we have about living in the world. If we do not have a relationship with God, we should be worrying, as we are not prepared to die.

Once more our Lord repeats his thoughts on worry. **Matthew 6:31-32** says “*Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.*”

Matthew 6:33 – “*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*” The promise comes to those seekers, those who desire to be in the Church more than anything this world has to offer. The process of seeking means doing the will of the Lord completely and it is to be done ahead of anything else. It must be first in our life and have our whole heart. **Matthew 22:37** reads “*And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’*”

As you pray each day read **Matthew 6:26** and thank God for daily blessings. Today ask for guidance to “seek first God's kingdom.” It is then we will find the worry that hinders us from having a peaceful and happy life will vanish. That is God's promise.



A Prayer for Our Youth

In **Proverbs 22:6** we read “*Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.*”

As Solomon wrote these words, he was giving us a clue into a deep piece of wisdom. Young people spend so much time in school, participating in clubs or playing sports. And parents spend lots of money, time and effort helping their child train to be the best they can be in these areas of life. Why do we put so much importance on these things? There's nothing wrong with belonging to a club, making good grades or exceling in sports. But are we spending as much money, time and effort training our children to serve our God and prepare for eternity?

When you look around the Church children are everywhere. They are figuring out life and who they are. They are full of life and full of questions. Often, their answers will come from what they are taught and the examples they see before them. We, as a Church, should be setting examples for them to follow and training them in the way they should live so they can not only know who they are, but whose they are.

Titus 2:1-8 says “*But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.*”

The youth are also to set an example for older people. If you are a member of the youth group or a child strive every day to walk closer to Christ. Work to be the best version of yourself to show others Christ. You are in a mission field like no other where many are asking for truth. Show them the truth and love found in God's Word.

1 Timothy 4:12 says “*Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.*”

Today, pray for the children in the Church and in your life. Pray they may search for and find answers to their questions from God and not the world around them. Pray their minds and hearts will be open to the Lord.

Now, pray for parents who are doing their best to teach and model God's love. Pray for the teachers who teach them in Bible class every week. Pray for the church staff to continue to show love and Jesus to these children. Pray for the children's minister, youth minister, interns, deacons, and all those serving the youth.

Finally, say a prayer for yourself to set a good, Christian example and show Jesus to the children you interact with. Pray your heart will be open to learn from our children and teenagers, as well. As Christ once told his closest followers, become like children or you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven. If you are a child pray for those older than you to see what you see.



Praying for Neighbors

When we think of the word “neighbor,” a wide range of thoughts may come to mind. Some may have fond thoughts of gatherings and friendships. Others, unfortunately, may think of the dog that visits their yard without supervision or their desire for a taller fence. While the majority of the world limits their view of neighbors to those who live in immediate proximity to themselves, we as Christians are called to view our neighbors differently. We are taught throughout Scripture that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves (**Mark 12:31, James 2:8, Galatians 5:14, Luke 10:27, Matthew 22:39**).

This teaching comes directly from Jesus as He explains the greatest commandment in **Mark 12:28-34**. More specifically, in **Mark 12:29-31** – *Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall 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: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”*

Sadly, many times we are tempted by our worldly nature to reduce the scope of this commandment and creatively reason who our neighbors may be. This tactic was attempted by a lawyer in **Luke 10:29**. Jesus clearly defines who our neighbors are in the parable of the good Samaritan. Any person who you have the opportunity to show God’s love, mercy, and grace to is your neighbor.

Today our ability to spread God’s word and fulfill the great commission (**Matthew 28:19**) is not limited to physical constraints as it once was. Technology and social media have opened up incredible opportunities to fulfill our purpose as Christians. We must remember the individuals we interact with on these platforms are as much our neighbors as those we interact with physically. Therefore, be mindful of the teachings in **James 3:5-12**. Today, we must not only concentrate on taming our tongues but our keystrokes as well.

As we seek to pray for our neighbors, we must first examine ourselves and identify any obstacles preventing others from seeing God’s love in us. Reflect on the perfect love of Christ and remember the forgiveness and grace He gives to us. Pray for hearts to be softened and for God to provide the wisdom, strength and boldness to deny our worldly nature and love our neighbors as He has loved us.

Make a list of specific “neighbors” in your life you have not shared your faith with. Pray specifically for them today. Next, pray for opportunities for God to open the door to share your faith with them. Finally, look for times to invite at least one to dinner, take them a dessert, or simply invite them to a church event.

List of My Neighbors:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

As you pray about these things, keep these verses in your mind and heart:

James 2:8 – *“If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.”*

Galatians 5:14 – *“For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

Matthew 28:19-20 – *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.”*



A Psalm of David

“I am sorry.” These three words are sometimes hard to say and if they do not come from a repentant heart, they are an empty gesture. When teaching young children to apologize, we have to explain to them that merely saying these words is not enough. As disciples, this is a principle we have to constantly apply when asking God for forgiveness.

Asking for forgiveness is hard to do. When we sin, we sometimes retreat from God in shame and guilt when we should be running towards Him.

We read about David and Bathsheba in **2 Samuel chapter 11 and 12**. David was confronted by Nathan after the son he conceived with Bathsheba was born. David’s sins had been committed almost a year prior to Nathan confronting him. I wonder if David thought he was in good standing with God this whole time? We are not told of David’s life in between his indiscretions and whether or not he repented. Did he continue as if nothing had happened – worshipping and giving sacrifices to God? David had seemingly hidden his sins from the majority of the people, but could not hide them from God. When confronted by Nathan, David realized this and proclaimed that even though he sinned with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah, ultimately, he had sinned against God (**Psalm 51:4**). If our sins are not known by another person, we may try to fool ourselves in thinking we have hidden them. We may go about our everyday lives as if everything is fine all the while being separated from God’s love, grace and mercy.

Once confronted with his sins, David approached God with a broken and contrite heart. His prayer to God is recorded in **Psalm 51**. David asks for mercy and that his sins be removed, but he also communicated what his response would be. David says that he can use his story to help others turn back to God (**Psalm 51:13**) and he will openly declare praise to God (**Psalm 51:15**).

Take a moment to stop and pray part of David’s prayer in Psalm 51 by praying **Psalm 51:10-15**:

*“Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.*

*Cast me not away from your presence
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

*Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.*

*Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.”*

Today, look for ways you can share your story of forgiveness to help others turn to or turn back to God. Lastly, be sure to always praise God for the forgiveness He grants us on a daily basis while we are walking in the light as He is in the light. As **1 John 1:7** reads “*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*”



Unnoticed Blessings

It's not difficult to recognize and count the many blessings God has given us. For most of us a quick personal list reveals common things we all recognize and consider as valuable blessings from God. In different ways we each can know that God has blessed us spiritually, physically, and emotionally.

His blessings bestowed on His creation and His people have been shown countless times throughout the Bible. We read in **Genesis 2** how God blessed Adam through His creation; placing him in the Garden of Eden, giving him dominion over the animals, providing him trees to eat from, and finally creating woman so he would not be alone. Ultimately, Adam and Eve would be blessed as the father and mother of the human race. But humanity would quickly fall into despair because of their sin and separation from God.

Noah and his family were blessed by God being spared from His wrath and following His divine instruction to escape peril from the flood. Then, having made a covenant with Abraham to bless all nations through his seed, God brought His blessings on His chosen people, the Israelites, by allowing their escape from Egyptian bondage, providing their daily sustenance in the wilderness, and giving their enemies into their hands during the conquering of the Promised Land. God continued pouring out His blessings over the Israelites, preserving the lineage for many generations in order that He might fulfill His promise to Abraham.

Ultimately, He gave to each of us His greatest blessing in sending His Son to earth to become the perfect sacrifice so we might be saved from our sins and reconciled to Him. And in our obedience to Him we might receive the spiritual blessings found only in Christ Jesus.

Having faith that God's blessings are real, as revealed in His Word, is one thing. But seeing and recognizing God's blessings in our personal lives is another. I wonder if we stop often enough to take inventory of those blessings.

In business and commerce anyone who "takes inventory" will tell you it is a detailed task with the intent being to capture the quantity of a product or service to assess its collective value.

Your challenge today is to "take inventory" of the blessings God has given you. Completing this task will help us see the blessings we might otherwise overlook.

First: Read **Matthew 6:25-34**.

Second: Quickly note but do not dwell on some things that have made you anxious lately.

Third: Take time to walk through your home and "inventory" the blessings that come to mind as you stop along the way looking for evidence of God's hand at work in your life. Don't overlook the simple and subtle things like photos of family, places, and events; kid's toys or school projects; your spouse's handy work; provisions in the pantry or clothes in the closet; your favorite chair or place to read God's Word; seasonal gatherings and meals shared around the dinner table.

Lastly: Pray to God thanking Him for all the ways He has blessed your life in ways not easily seen.



Someone You Want to Pray for

Is there someone in your life who needs prayer? This may be a co-worker, child, parent, waitress, business owner, authority figure, teacher, or friend. Whoever is on your heart today, journal a personal prayer to God on their behalf. Don't be afraid to let this person know today that you prayed for them and you love them.



What Matters When Praying?

In **Matthew 6:5**, Jesus tells His disciples it matters that we pray, then goes on to tell us how to pray in **Matthew 6:9-13**. But why? Why is it so important that we have a guide on how to pray? If God loves us so much, does it really matter that we follow this guideline?

Before Jesus's sacrifice, the Israelites would have to go through a Priest and offer various sacrifices to be forgiven of their sins. Only when God initiated a conversation would they have a direct communication. We can see that respect and humility, when talking and praying to God, is necessary to show we acknowledge His sovereignty and power.

While God demands respect, we also have an amazing opportunity to commune with God on an individual and private level. In **Luke 22:39-46**, Jesus leaves the disciples to pray amongst themselves so He may have a private and personal conversation with God. I feel we see Jesus's most vulnerable prayer and communion with God in these verses. So, while we have a guide on how to pray, we also have the ability to be open and vulnerable with Him in ways we may not be while others are around.

One more important thing to remember while praying is our attitude. When praying, we need to have faith (**Mark 11:24, James 1:6-7**). We're told that God cares more about the sincerity of the prayer than the physical show (**Matthew 6:5-8**). Praying in faith is a way to show God how we respect His power because we believe He is able to do anything.

For many people, the closing of a prayer has become more of a habit when we say “in Jesus’s name we pray, Amen.” But in order to have the proper attitude when praying, we need to understand the rationale of using these words. In **John 14:13**, Jesus reminds us that whatever we ask for in His name will be done. But we should also remember we are unclean and unholy sinners and without the Great Sacrifice (Jesus), we could not speak directly to God. So, it’s important to remember we are not just ending a conversation but rather we are humbly thanking the Lord Almighty for offering His Son as a sacrifice and thanking the Son for being the sacrifice that allows us to have this communion with God.

Keep these things in mind as, today, you write out your prayer below.

Dear God,



Matthew 5:21-26 - Anger

Is anger a choice? Can you choose to be angry or not to be angry? What if anger is a choice? What if nothing, not even physical pain, can force you to be angry? The root cause of your anger is your expectations, pride, and beliefs that determine when and what leads to anger. There is a plethora of examples in the Bible you can review where people chose to be angry and the consequences of their decisions. **Genesis 4:1-10; Numbers 22:21-35; Exodus 32:7-29** are just a few examples.

Anger is not a sin. Jesus himself experienced anger in **Mark 3:1-6**. The question though is how does your anger impact other people? Listen to what Jesus says about anger in **Matthew 5:21-22**, “*You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.*”

God spoke a direct command to Noah after leaving the Ark in **Genesis 9:6** which says, “*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.*” This is the first formal command God gave since the command of not eating from certain trees in the Garden of Eden. This command specifically says the “act” of shedding blood is forbidden. The “why” is simply humankind is created in God’s image. The very image of God is so holy that ending the life of another image of God is sin.

Jesus interestingly adds to this command by removing the “act” and instead focusing on the “heart.” Jesus states that not just the “act” of killing but even anger or an insult directed at another who is the image of God is sin. We learn here that both inward and outward anger directed at someone who is a reflection of God is wrong simply because of God’s holiness.

Jesus continues talking about anger by stating in **Matthew 5:23-26**, “*So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*”

Jesus teaches us that anger should not be directed at other people who are images of God. What our focus should be on is reconciliation with other people. His examples are powerful. Before we even come before God even with a gift (not even an ask but a gift!), we should reconcile with anyone we can think of who has something against us. This is the inverse of reconciling with those who we have a grievance with. Instead, think of anyone who has a grievance toward you regardless if you deem their grievance worthy, and seek them out (not wait for them to come to you!). Jesus then leaves us with the thought that reconciliation even has worldly benefits we can achieve if we keep our anger from being directed at others and become masters of reconciliation.

Here is what we can learn from Jesus and pray about today:

First, write down what makes you angry or what this past week made you feel angry. For each of these, ask yourself why? What expectation, pride, or belief was not met that resulted in you feeling angry? Were the actions you took righteous from your anger? As you reflect on this list, offer this up to God in prayer. Ask God for help to remove anger where the anger was not directed at sin but instead, toward another image of God.

Second, list out the names of people who have something against you regardless of how you personally feel about their grievance. Looking over the list, there may be only one or none you are ready to engage but you can begin by praying to God and asking Him to change your heart today. God bless you in your walk with Him today as you seek to follow the teachings of Christ.



A Prayer for Our Missionaries

The dictionary definition of missionary is a person undertaking a mission, especially a religious mission, to spread God's word. The word missionary often creates an image of someone sharing God's word in a distant land. Our Church family is blessed to support numerous missionaries, both foreign and domestic!

Mark 16:15 – “And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.’”

When I read this, at times, my response is ‘when am I going to have time and resources to do that? I must provide for myself and my family, and when circumstances allow, I will spread the Word and support missionaries.’ It is this type of thinking that makes daily prayer so vital. “I must” statements do not allow space for God to work in us and through us. Without daily pray we are blind to God’s power just like Elisha’s servant in **2 Kings**.

2 Kings 6:15-17 – “When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, ‘Alas, my master! What shall we do?’ He said, ‘Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.’ So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

Prayer opens our eyes to God’s ways. God provides a powerful avenue to proclaim His gospel to the whole creation through prayer for missionaries. We can do this daily by praying for the missionaries our Church supports. When we pray for missionaries, we strive with them in their efforts to spread God’s Word. God uses our prayers to propel others to greater heights and effectiveness in their calling. This higher level of effectiveness is not possible without the fervent prayers of church members.

Focus your prayer for our missionaries by:

1) Reading the words of Isaiah out loud as a reminder to pray for others in answering His call in spreading the gospel.

Isaiah 6:8 – “And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here I am! Send me.’”

2) Read **Psalm 127:1-2** and then pray for our missionaries to have a clear mission from God and not toil in vain.

Psalm 127:1-2 – “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.”

3) Make a list below and pray for Eastside specific missionaries that God would keep them from opposition and danger abroad and in travel.



Praying for Those Doing Thankless Jobs

God designed our world to work as a system and gave us all different roles, talents and abilities. When I think about all the unnoticed people in our community doing thankless jobs, it reminds me of the passage in **1 Corinthians 12:12-31**, where Paul talks about the church being one body.

1 Corinthians 12:21-22 – *“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”*

I think that can also be applied here, in a sense, where in our community we are all part of a greater system that allows everything to work as one.

A google search of the ‘Top Ten Thankless Jobs’ produced a list of several that many of us may take for granted. It included:

1. Farmers
2. Teachers
3. Social Workers
4. Military
5. IRS Agents
6. Garbage Collectors
7. Window Cleaners
8. Paralegals
9. Interns
10. Emergency dispatchers

Can you imagine a world without the people on this list? If all the farmers went on strike, it wouldn’t be long before we would be out of food! Teachers do an incredible job of teaching our kids and managing all that goes on in their classroom during a normal day. I think many parents discovered a deeper appreciation for teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic when trying to teach their own kids at home. It’s not easy! Can you imagine a country without the military or police? We could quickly lose many of the freedoms we probably take for granted. A world without laws and law enforcement would be a very difficult one to live in safely. Of course, if someone stopped picking up the garbage it would only be a matter of a few weeks before it built up and became unbearable.

Let’s make sure we acknowledge and say thank you to those in our community that work so hard and provide a service that helps our entire world continue to run each day.

Write a list below of a few people you know in need of a “Thank You” for doing a great job – whether their job is on the list above or not, most people are underappreciated for the work they do. This may also be a spouse or parent we sometimes take for granted.

As you pray today, ask God to help you notice those around you and to be truly thankful for the service they are providing, and then ask God to help you show your sincere appreciation for what they do. Ask God to open a door to a conversation about Him and the Bible to help you draw that person nearer to Him. After your prayer, pick one person from the list you made above to write a note, give a gift, text, or call to thank them.



A Prayer of Jesus

Many commentaries say John 17 is truly the Lord's Prayer. This is the prayer Jesus offered on the night of his betrayal. Judas is off doing his treachery. Surely the cross was in His thoughts as He talked to His Father on behalf of Himself, the apostles, and all believers. James Burton Coffman says in his "Commentary on John" ACU press 1974, page 400, this prayer should be "understood as the expressed desire of a soul in complete harmony with God."

We can only speculate as to why He refers to Himself in third person in verse three. This is the first time Jesus uses the name Jesus Christ, but many commentaries think He is so in tune with God He sees His human existence apart from His heavenly existence. He is remembering his time with the Father prior to creation. Can we ever become so in tune with God that we see heaven even though we are on earth?

Jesus gave His apostles the "words" that will tell of the salvation that Christ brought into the world. Words that will allow them to know God. To know God has a depth of meaning.

1 John 2:4 - "Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him,"

1 John 4:8 - "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."

His prayer is for His apostles and also all who would become part of Christ through the words of Christ. It is imperative that we study these words to learn how we are to become part of God. Jesus has guarded the apostles and He did not lose one, except for Judas as prophesied in **Psalm 41:9**. His desire is that God will guard them from the "evil one."

He goes on to ask that God will keep "*those who will believe in me through their word*" (**John 17:20**). But the overall request is they will all be one. This plea for unity is based on the Word delivered to the apostles which will be delivered to the world.

The unaltered story that Christ died for us to save us and all who believe and obey the Word delivered will be one just as Jesus and God are one. Paul says in **Colossians 3:16** "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.*"

Read **John 17** and write below some of the phrases Jesus uses that you could use in your prayer today. With that text in mind:

- » Pray you will be a better student of the Word. Set up a schedule for study. Have a goal of internalizing the Word.
- » Pray that all those who have obeyed the gospel will work to be more like Christ.
- » Pray we can see the common ground in each relationship with our neighbors.
- » Pray we may all be one in word and deed as Christ is in God and God is in Christ and Christ is in us. A circle that will be completed when we all get to heaven.



Blessed By Others

Looking back through the years to my early childhood, one of the common and most frequent instructions I received was to “count your blessings.” I feel confident you may have received the same instruction. God’s word is full of prayers filled with praise and thankfulness for multiple blessings. One of the biggest blessings Christians can experience is the presence of a person in their life who has greatly impacted them spiritually. For many, that spiritual influence came in the early years from a parent or grandparent. Through adolescence and adulthood, it may have come from siblings, friends, church members, dating relationships or a spouse.

The beauty of impacting someone spiritually is they recognize that life-changing effect and will likely want to have a similar influence on someone else. Looking at the Old Testament, we see in **Exodus 18** the relationship between Jethro and his son-in-law, Moses. They shared a mutual respect which allowed Jethro to offer loving advice on leadership and delegation to Moses. We also see a relationship where Moses impacts the life of his assistant, Joshua. In **Exodus chapters 17 and 24**, and again in **Numbers 27**, we see that Moses was intentional in his mentoring of Joshua. He gave Joshua tasks, allowed him to build trust, encouraged him in front of others and ultimately, stepped aside to let Joshua take a leading role.

Moving to the New Testament, we see Barnabas throughout the book of Acts impacting the lives of Christians. He set an example for the Christians in Jerusalem in **Acts 4**, he encouraged new believers in **Acts 11** and worked alongside Paul on his first missionary journey in **Acts 13**. When Paul refused to work with Mark in **Acts 15**, we see that Barnabas invested in Mark as well. Paul shared the same type of love and encouragement in his relationship with young Timothy in **2 Timothy 2**.

As you think about your own life, who has greatly impacted you spiritually? Write the name(s) down in the space to the right. Now, write down someone’s name who you think you can spiritually influence.

As you pray, thank God for the person or people who spiritually impacted you. Pray for the continued growth of those who you have impacted. Ask God for wisdom and guidance as you seek individuals in your life who need your Godly influence. If the person who impacted your life is still living, call or write them to thank them for the eternal gift they gave you. Reach out to those on whom you have influence and encourage them and let them know you are praying for them.

Other passages to consider today:

Proverbs 27:17 – “*Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.*”

Proverbs 12:26 – “*One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.*”

Deuteronomy 6:6-7 – “*And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*”

2 Timothy 3:16-17 – “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*”

I Timothy 4:12 – “*Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.*”



Someone You Want to Come to Christ

I'm sure there are many in your life who you hope come to know Christ someday. Today, focus on *one* of the souls in your life who has yet to do so. Write out your prayer asking God for opportunities to share His love with them and pray for this particular person in any way they may need prayer right now.



What Doesn't Matter When Praying?

One of the most important parts of our lives is prayer. It gives us the opportunity to speak with our Lord. We can make requests, express gratitude, or seek guidance directly from our Father and He will listen! The Bible assures us of this in **Jeremiah 29:12-13** and **1 Peter 3:12**. We never need to take this for granted although, sometimes, I'm afraid we do. Today, focus on some things that don't matter when we pray.

Sometimes we put unnecessary pressure on ourselves when we pray. We think we have to say the right words, in the right place, at the right time, and in the correct posture for God to hear our prayers. None of these things are necessary when we pray.

In Luke 11:1, Jesus was praying and when He finished one of His disciples asked if He would teach them to pray. His answer comes in verses 2-4 of the same chapter. It's worth noting that He never mentions the proper posture, place, or time we need to pray. I believe if those things were necessary, He would have instructed them on it.

When I pray, generally, my eyes are closed and my head is bowed. Sometimes I'm standing and sometimes sitting. At night I like to get on my knees to pray, but I've also prayed after lying down in bed. God listened to each of those prayers.

In **Matthew 6:7-13** we also see another example of the Lord's Prayer. In verse seven, He instructs us not to babble. I think it's important to note this isn't condemning long prayers but meaningless verbiage. He follows this up in verse eight, by assuring us that God knows what we need before we even ask! How comforting is that? Fancy words aren't necessary, and we don't need to make sure God understands what we are asking. He already knows!

Study and meditate on the two verses below. Let's remember that God hears our prayers not because of how good we are, if we kneel or stand, or how fancy our words, but because of how great and loving He is! Pray every day, with humility and confidence, and focus on what matters.

Philippians 4:6 – “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*”

1 John 5:14 – “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”

Dear God,

—, Amen.



Matthew 7:1-5 – Judging Others

Matthew 7:1 says “*Judge not, that you be not judged.*”

This verse read by itself and pulled out of context has caused much confusion as to what Jesus was teaching. Many use this verse to say Jesus placed a total prohibition on any type of judgment or discernment. It is only by reading this verse in its proper context and in light of other biblical teachings, that we can truly understand what Jesus was teaching.

The first thing we must understand concerning Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:1 is the judgment which he is warning us about is *not* the discerning type judgment which all Christians are to practice daily, but rather it *is* the condemning judgment which places us as the judge over others. Throughout Scripture, God has instructed His people to know His will and to discern (judge) between what is right and what is wrong. **Romans 12:2, Philippians 1:9-10, John 7:24, 1 John 4:1** are all examples of this.

Romans 12:2 says “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*”

Proper judgment is necessary for a healthy spiritual life. We must use God's Word to judge between right and wrong in our lives, in the things we are taught, and in the actions of others.

As we go from new in our faith to mature Christians, God expects us to use our knowledge of His Word to be able to judge between what is right and what is wrong. **Hebrews 5:14** says, “*But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*”

The judgment Christians are prohibited from engaging in is a condemning judgment. **Acts 17:31** and **Psalm 9:8; 50:6** make it very clear that God is the only judge of humankind.

God has not given us as Christians a ministry of condemning the world, just as this was not Christ's ministry when He was sent by God to the world (**John 3:17**). Rather, God has given us a mission of reconciling the world back to Him – as stated in **2 Corinthians 5:18-19** – “*All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*”

As we go back to our lesson text and place verse one in context with the other verses, we begin to see what Jesus was teaching is that we as Christians must not condemn others with our judgments, but rather use our knowledge of right and wrong to first make sure our lives are following the will of God, and then engage in our ministry of reconciliation to help others live closer to God.

Matthew 7:1-5 – “*Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but you do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*”

Jesus' teaching admonishes us to first be diligent to remove any sin from our own lives. It is only then we can fulfill our ministry of reconciliation by helping our brother remove sin from his life.

Today my prayer is that I will learn to look at others in the same way Jesus did, with love and compassion and a heart to help rather than hurt. May I live close to God today in my actions and attitudes so I will be prepared to help anyone He places in my path.

Will you join me in this prayer today?



A Prayer for Our Shepherds

Have you ever had unrealistic expectations of shepherds, or elders? As a young child, I thought of elders as older men who were nearly perfect, always pleasing God, and probably never even tempted to do wrong. As I matured a little, I recognized that all people are tempted and, according to **Romans 3:23**, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” While I understood that no one, except Jesus, could be perfect, **I Timothy 3:1-7** would humble any man considering serving in that role.

1 Timothy 3:1-7 says “*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*”

A good man serving as an elder has already evaluated himself based on those qualifications and struggled to feel “good enough,” however, he was aware of the many examples of our powerful God doing amazing things through imperfect people. After many hours in prayer and deep discussions with his wife, he trusted God to guide him and give him the wisdom needed to “shepherd” a congregation of the body of Christ with love and humility.

While the expectations of an elder are high, the expectations of an elder’s wife can be very challenging. She can also struggle, feeling she is not “good enough,” or not doing enough. She often feels intimidated by that role. An elder and his wife are a team and must be there for each other, especially during the difficult times. They need the prayers of the church, just as we need the prayers of our shepherds (**James 5:16**).

A strong church is not an accident or coincidence. It is usually led by an eldership committed to being more like Christ every day. Their love and compassion for the church, individually and collectively, can be seen in their humility and strength. They deal with situations that require gentleness and others that require boldness. They understand the importance of unity and the damage that can be caused by selfishness and division. In **Acts 20:30**, Paul warned the elders at Ephesus about “*men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*”

Our elders take their responsibilities seriously and serve unselfishly. We are thankful for Sam Brandon, Ricky Bugher, Michael Graham, David Holt, Ryan McDonald, and David Walton. Their love and commitment to God and to the Eastside Church of Christ continues to impact so many lives within the congregation, in the community and across the world. We appreciate their efforts to connect with us through our Sunday School classes. Ron Cannefax, who recently stepped down from the eldership, has been a valuable source of knowledge and encouragement to our elders and our congregation. Take a moment to reflect on a shepherd who has impacted you spiritually. Make sure to include this in your prayer today and let a shepherd know you appreciate him.

Today, let’s pray that God will bless our shepherds and their families with good health and keep them safe. We ask that they be blessed with wisdom, guidance, strength and encouragement as they manage the challenges facing the church, as well as the challenges facing their own families. We also pray they will feel love and support from an appreciative congregation as we all strive to please God.



Praying for Opportunities to Share Jesus

It's probably been six years or so but I still remember it vividly.

"Hey, how are you doing today? I'm Philip and this is Becca and we're just out here in your neighborhood today asking people if they'd like to learn more about the Bible. Would you like to learn more about the Bible?"

I gave my best MJ stateside pitch in my usual, happy-go-lucky, squinty-eyed smile sort of way.

The man, in his 40s, (I surmise) was hard to read. Totally silent, he stared at me. But not in a confused sort of way. More so in a way that felt as if he wished he could shoot laser beams from his eyes and engulf me in flames. After a few seconds (of failed attempts to shoot laser beams from his eyes?) he spoke, "I'm not interested. You guys just go on." He continued, "And I'll tell you something else: the man who lives right in that house is elderly and in poor health so he won't be interested either."

It wasn't the most interesting response, but what was more interesting was the way he stood in his yard and watched us walk to the next house, and then to the house of the elderly gentleman he mentioned.

"Hey!" he shouted angrily. "Didn't you hear what I said?!"

"I'm sorry? What?"

"I told y'all to go on! Don't bother him! Or I'll call the cops! Now y'all get goin'!"

And now comes the part of the story I hate the most: *I listened.*

From time to time I think about the door on that campaign that I never knocked. What would've happened if I had?

Would the elderly man have answered? What if he didn't know Jesus? What if he, in poor health, was thinking about what was waiting for him on the other side of this life with an open heart? What if he had obeyed the gospel? Would he have gone on to share it with his angry next-door neighbor who clearly needed the love of Jesus?

If you've been on a campaign, you know every morning should begin in the same way: a short devotional the teams and praying for opportunities to share Jesus with people you meet. What if God was granting me the very opportunity we had petitioned Him for earlier that morning?

Opportunities to share Jesus are not just found on stateside mission trips — they are before us every day. They are in phone calls, text messages, emails. They are in conversations at work, with our friends and families, and yes, right next door.

Who is someone that you have the opportunity to share Jesus with right now?

While it's good to pray for opportunities, and we ought to, I believe more often than not, opportunities to share Jesus are right in front of us. Perhaps we should pray, too, for the courage and the wisdom to take advantage of the opportunities God has already given us.

As you pray today, join me in praying for the boldness the early disciples had to share their faith with others. Don't make my mistake and let a trivial earthly threat (or any fear at all) keep you from fulfilling a divine command.

Ask God for courage and wisdom as you go about speaking a word for Him today.

Acts 4:29 — "And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness,"



Song of Mary

How would you react if a friend got you in a situation that may cause people to belittle you, ostracize you, and possibly harm you? Would you react with fear or anger? Or, would you act with peace, gratefulness, and joy?

The setting is approximately 1 B.C. in a time when women were treated like property, had very little influence, and no power. This particular woman was young and not from a wealthy or influential family, yet she was entrusted with the most treasured item on earth.

When Mary was told about her special responsibility, **Luke 1:29** says she was “greatly troubled.” Her soon to be husband was so concerned with public opinion that he planned to divorce her to avoid trouble (**Matthew 1:18-19**). However, angels convinced them both that this circumstance was God’s plan and that, “*nothing will be impossible with God.*” (**Luke 1:37**)

Later, we get an intimate view into Mary’s thoughts, emotions, and her reaction when Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth, visited her during her pregnancy. Mary’s song (prayer) is deep, personal, and mature. Is it any wonder that Gabriel told Mary she was “*favored*” by God? (**Luke 1:28**) What can we learn from Mary’s prayer and her reaction to this ‘situation’?

Does Mary curse or question God? No, she praises God when she says “*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*” (**Luke 1:46-47**)

Instead of being bitter for the immediate effects she may endure, she praises God, realizing this ‘situation’ is a blessing to her and generations to come (**Luke 1:48-49**).

Mary recognizes she is chosen and is exalted to bare such a burden for God and humanity. She does not mock God. On the contrary, she reveals the very nature of God when she says, “*He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.*” (**Luke 1:51-52**)

She shows the personal side of God when she states, “*he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.*” (**Luke 1:53**)

How did Mary react? She reacted with faith, trust, and an attitude of someone who knows the very heart of our Lord. For a person who was about to experience the unknown of a newborn and possible ridicule, the Bible does not record her asking for anything. Instead, she used her words to glorify God and recognize Him as the great I Am.

What a blessing Mary’s prayer is to our lives. This should teach us that even in times of uncertainty, we should use prayer to elevate God, praise Him, and glorify Him. Let’s be mindful of Mary’s prayer when we experience troubles in our life.

Reread Mary’s song in **Luke 1:46-55** and use some of the phrases in your prayer of praise today.



God's Word is a Blessing

When I was a kid, I used to have nightmares... A LOT. These dreams would fill my mind with fear and worry and I didn't know why I continued to have them. They'd get so bad I'd wake up in the middle of the night asking to sleep with my mom and dad because I couldn't handle being alone.

I remember my mom praying with me before bed and I would always ask her to pray that I wouldn't have bad dreams. Every time she prayed that over me, I realized I wouldn't have the dreams anymore and my mind was more at ease falling asleep. My young mind was thrilled thinking to myself "I can just pray and the bad dreams go away?? Awesome!"

It was at this point in my young life that I made a promise to God to pray to Him every night and in return He would make the bad dreams go away, and for the most part... it worked! But it instilled within me growing up a very broken prayer life - seeing prayer as something I had to do instead of something I wanted to do. It wasn't until I got to college, I realized the power of prayer and it was revealed to me through God's Word.

I remember really wrestling with this thought that I couldn't get off of my mind. I would be listening to my lecture and it would pop into my head and I'd get knots in my stomach thinking about it, even going to sleep in my dorm would be a struggle because this thought kept me up at night. The thought I was wrestling with was "One day I'm going to deal with the death of a loved one, and I don't know how I'm going to deal with it."

I knew I had to do something to get my mind off of it so, I went off campus to get alone with God and I prayed. I asked Him to erase the thought from my mind completely or to give me peace about it and as I was praying those things, I noticed my Bible was in the backseat of my car. I grabbed it and turned to the concordance to find verses that had the word "death" in them. It led me to **Isaiah 25:8** which reads "*He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.*"

As I read this a wave of peace washed over me and the thought I was struggling with was trumped with the truth of God's Word knowing He will swallow up death forever and our sorrow will turn into joy when we return back to Him.

How often is God's Word in the backseat of our lives when we need it most? It's my hope for you to take time today to meditate on the truth of God's Word and allow the peace He offers to wash over any anxiety or worry you're wrestling with.

Consider **Psalm 119:105** - "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*"

Whatever you may be going through, God's Word can be a powerful blessing to us if we simply allow it to be. It can be a wonderful light to our paths. Study it, meditate on it, and let it be written on our hearts. Today, pray a prayer of thankfulness for God's Word and reflect on any Scriptures that come to mind that you may need to read right now to help you in whatever season of life you're in.



Your Prayer for Our Congregation

Today focus on our congregation, the Eastside Church of Christ. Take a moment to dream and imagine something you *want* for our congregation. This could be growth, a renewed zeal, desires for more service, continued unity, etc. What role can you or should you play in making it happen? Write a prayer asking God to help this dream become a reality and that He will use you during the transformation.



How Does God Answer Prayer?

When I celebrated my sixteenth birthday, my dad told me he was going to buy me a car. Almost daily, I would ask him when he was going to buy it. His answer was always, not today, not tomorrow, but soon. There are times when we pray to God, expecting immediate answers, but with a gentle, loving voice, He gives the same answer my dad gave me. Sometimes we must wait and sometimes He answers in a way we are not expecting.

We live in a world where people are sinful and separated from God. We have all done, thought, or said bad things, the Bible says, *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). In Romans 6:23, we read that sin results in death, a spiritual separation from God.

Romans 6:23 – *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

The good news is that God sent His Son to die for our sins. Jesus died in our place so we could have a relationship with God and be with Him forever. If we serve a God who loves us enough to send His son to face a cruel death on the cross for our sins, we must realize He deserves and expects our prayers. He is waiting to answer once we do our part by praying.

Here are several ideas from which we can launch our prayers and requests:

1. Have a clear understanding that you are praying to the God of heaven. Let your mind be focused on Him and know that He is worthy of all your love, respect and thanksgiving.
2. Never forget to thank Him for loving you. Without Him and His forgiveness, we would be eternally lost.
3. Understanding that God has a plan for you, pray that His Will in your life will become clearer. The Father knows what we need and can see the entire picture on a broad expanse. Allow Him to be in control.

4. Do not be timid. When you pray, be specific and ask for what you need. In **James 4:2**, the Christians to whom James was writing were having trouble getting along and they refused to pray about their needs, so he told them they were not getting what they needed, because they were not asking God for help. God is waiting for us to approach Him, we need to come before His throne, through Christ, boldly, but respectfully, asking for what we want and need.

5. Ask for forgiveness. Our Father is waiting to forgive us, as soon as we petition Him. When we are forgiven, a heavy burden is lifted from our souls and we can get on with working the plan God has for us.

Look back over the last couple of weeks and think about the prayers God has answered. For today, make a list of specific prayer requests for God and boldly pray for those requests. Use the space below.



Matthew 6:14-15 – Forgiveness

Matthew 6:14 tells us “*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*”

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 is a real global tragedy. However, there's been a much more vicious pandemic raging for eons that has affected humankind since Eden – the pandemic of sin. We all are victims of its destruction, but there is a complete cure for it; that cure is in Jesus' blood that is freely given to all who will accept it.

One of the most difficult sins with which we have to deal is failing to forgive those who wrong us. Look at one of Jesus' most powerful utterances from the cross, “*And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’*” (Luke 23:34). If anyone ever had reason not to forgive, it was our Savior. No human could have been more abused in every way than He, but He earnestly did beg God to forgive all of those who abused Him. I am certain that God forgave the penitent ones at Pentecost as the Gospel was proclaimed to them and God continues to forgive.

So, if Jesus could forgive His enemies, how much more should we be willing to forgive those who wrong us? It is difficult – yes, it is! But there is no excuse not to do so if we are to have a spirit like our Master. One of my very favorite passages regarding true forgiveness is from **John 8**.

John 8:3-11 reads “*The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?’ This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, ‘Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.’ And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus stood up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.’*

Obviously, her accusers cared little for forgiveness or for her – their souls had been seared by their self-righteousness.

What gratitude this “sinful woman” must have felt when Jesus reacted as He did. One thing we need to remember is that Jesus didn't “excuse” her sin. He never does that, but He did teach them and all of us a monumental lesson on forgiveness.

There is no room in God's Kingdom for people who constantly mistreat others and are unwilling to repent and ask forgiveness of either God or their victims. How sad to know of people who waste their entire lives hating and hurting others but never forgiving. Usually, such ones finish their lives as miserably unhappy wretches.

From childhood, I remember a saying from some wise person in my little community – “*Hate is like an acid; it damages the container more than that upon which it is poured.*” May God give all of us souls and minds that realize we are weak and sinful and we must be daily forgiving others, as well as forgiving ourselves. When we have that spirit of forgiveness, our spiritual lives tend to soar much as the prophet Isaiah said in his beautifully eloquent, Holy Spirit-inspired language, “*...they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint*” (Isaiah 40:31).

For your prayer today, first focus on God's forgiveness in your life. Confess your sins and then find peace in His forgiveness. Express gratitude and praise for His love. Secondly, focus on hate in your life. Free yourself from it by forgiving others.



A Prayer for...

After shutting down the engines, I focused on a large crowd gathering around a jet across the ramp. My crew chief climbed the ladder. I pointed and said, “Looks like a very important person.” With a calm and pleasant voice, he corrected me, “We are ALL very important people.” I thought for a moment and replied, “You are right.” Sometimes we need a reminder that God loves every soul. The congregations in Galatia, Ephesus, and Corinth received inspired teaching from Paul on this, *“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Galatians 3:27-28). Each soul has equal worth to our Heavenly Father, enough to send His only Son.

We might overlook some parts of the body of Christ. We have been praying for different categories in our church family, and now we should include singles, widows and widowers, college students, divorced members, parents, single parents, and others. Try to put yourself in their shoes. Our brothers and sisters face struggles that we might not realize. A widow explained, “I knew that my husband might die before me, but I never thought that I would be all alone.” A divorced mother shared, “I am so tired... I just try to make it through each day.” A single brother confided, “I enjoy being single and working for the LORD; some people assume that something is wrong with you if you are single, that you are somehow not a whole Christian.” One common theme among these members is isolation. They sometimes feel disconnected. The Holy Word instructs us in **1 Corinthians 12** and **Ephesians 4** that the church body is made up of many parts and when we work together, we enjoy unity, growth, and love. We each have a place and a role in God’s Kingdom. We need to remind one another that we all belong.

Ephesians 4:15-16 tells us *“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”*

1 Corinthians 12:12-18 & 25-27 says *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.”* And then picking up in verses 25-27, *“that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”*

Please think about some of your brothers and sisters you might not normally pray for and write their names down. Then, brainstorm how you can encourage and build them up in their faith. We probably do not need to pray that a single Christian gets married, but we can pray for that single Christian to grow in faith. What are some ways they will feel more connected? How can we be more inclusive during our Bible classes and activities?

Please reach out and let a brother or sister know you prayed for them. You never know how much they may need to know you care. When my daughter was little, she made cupcakes and gave them to members at church that might get overlooked. One widower, struggling and weak after cancer treatments, brightened the room with his smile and watery eyes, “You made this for me? Thank you!” By a simple act of kindness and inclusiveness, we were all built up that day.



Praying with Someone

In 2020, we experienced multiple disasters that in the past have been spread over decades: tornados, floods, pandemics, economic downturn, and social unrest. So, it is perhaps more important than ever that we reflect the light in *what we do and how we do it*. When the world around us is so dark, we're especially reminded of our duty to shine in *what we say and in how we say it*. In this present moment it is imperative that we bear the fruit of the Spirit. May we be loving, joyous, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled.

This is not the fruit we see displayed in the news and social media. This is not the fruit we always receive from others. This is not the fruit we always give easily from our own human nature. Rather, bearing this Fruit is a discipline we chose to follow. It is in this moment we learn how strongly we are committed to our choice, and perhaps learn where we still have need to train and prune our spiritual vines to grow toward His light.

May we treat others with dignity and respect. May we ask often, not just tell. May we listen more than we speak. May we truly hear others: those with whom we agree and have a lot in common, and also those with whom we disagree or with different life experiences than our own. May we season our speech with salt, rather than be salty in our speech. May we remember that each person is a God-breathed soul. May we always center our thoughts, speech, actions, and lives around God and the blessings He has richly showered upon each one of us. May we be His obedient servants for His glory.

Today, pray for and with those around you. See every person as a soul in need. This will take intentional effort on your part. How will you know their needs unless you observe, ask, and listen carefully? Treat what may appear to be a coworker's casual request to "keep me in your prayers" as a tearful plea for immediate intervention, and offer to pray together on the spot.

Romans 8:26-27 – *"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."*

Today, listen with peaceful self-control to someone who expresses open hostility to your Christian faith. Do your very best to identify their needs, and immediately pray for them.

Matthew 5:43-45 – *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."*

Today, with loving kindness consider the politicians whose decisions impact you, particularly those with whom you disagree. With gentle patience petition our Heavenly Father on their behalf.

1 Timothy 2:1-3 – *"First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior..."*

Today, be diligent in lifting all these up in fervent prayer to our Heavenly Father for their salvation, for your encouragement, and for His glory.

1 Samuel 12:23 – *"...far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you."*



A Prayer of Hezekiah

For today's lesson on prayer, let's contrast two different characters. Each was a king of Judah: King Hezekiah, who did "...what was good and right and faithful..." (2 Chronicles 31:20), and King Asa who was considered to be a righteous king.

Both kings became gravely ill. When King Hezekiah fell ill, Isaiah said he would not recover and subsequently die. 2 Kings 20:2-3 tells us "*Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, saying, Now, O LORD, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight. And Hezekiah wept bitterly.*"

Can you feel the sincere intensity of Hezekiah's heart while praying? God healed him and he was given 15 more years to live.

King Asa's response to his sickness is in 2 Chronicles 16:12 "...Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe. Yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but sought help from physicians." Asa did not recover and died within two years of his diagnosis.

I see two lessons from the examples of Hezekiah and Asa:

We need to pray for health (Asa did not). We must do so as part of His creation. God is God and we are not. We must have a submissive heart. Stand in the position as a created being, and bow our hearts before Him. Then, submit to His will and direction.

Secondly, remember Matthew 15:8 "*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.*" Hezekiah's heart was singularly focused.

From personal experience I have witnessed two dramatic cases of answered prayers. First, my dad was diagnosed with Stage 4 lung cancer in his late 80s. He prayed fervently about that dreaded disease. He did recover. His oncologist told me he wouldn't have given him a 15 percent chance of being healed. Second, my wife had a mishap in an operation. She went into septic shock, requiring code teams to revive her twice. Her organs began failing and she suffered a stroke. All this required five months in hospitals. Most did not expect her to survive. Hundreds of prayers were offered up for her during her hospitalizations. Today she has completely recovered. Prayer works!

Are our prayers too timid? We can boldly approach Him in faith. Have confidence, trusting in His grace. Pray with the faith that God will act.

Ephesians 3:20-21 says "*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*"

Be assured prayer works. Not when we try to convince Him to do something on our behalf, and to bend to our will, but when it draws us or others closer to Him and His will.

In your prayer for today, ask God to heal someone you know and love and be intense about your request. Pray from your heart and remember that prayer is powerful.



The Blessing of Eternal Hope

When we think of the blessings we enjoy as God's children, there is probably none greater than the eternal rewards He has planned for us. It is natural in the human experience to ponder the future beyond this life.

In the epistle of James, he reminds us of the brevity of life. **James 4:13-14** tells us “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’ — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”

Compared to eternity, our life here is so very short. For that reason, we need to understand how much we need God and His salvation.

When we think of God's plan for His children, our hearts should be overflowing with joy and thankfulness. Consider the following:

- 1) God loves and cares for His children (**John 3:16-17**). John proclaims in **1 John 4:16** that God is love, and God will abide in us if we love Him.

1 John 4:16 reads “So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”

- 2) Jesus suffered many things including death on a Roman cross for our salvation.

1 Peter 2:24 states “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

- 3) Jesus loves us and is our advocate with the Father (**1 John 2:1**). The reward of heaven after this life gives us great hope.

- 4) There is a wonderful place prepared for God's children (**John 14:1-3**). In the place Jesus has prepared for us, we will live with Him forever.

This comforting point is made in **John 14:1-3** “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

- 5) There will be no sickness, no sadness, no night and no death in heaven.

John writes in **Revelation 21:4** “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

While in our mortal bodies, we experience all of these things, but in heaven we will dwell in joy and peace eternally.

- 6) Heaven will be a beautiful place and John paints a picture using some of the splendors of this earth – precious stones, streets paved with gold and the river of the water of life (**Revelation 21:21; 22:1-5**).

By recognizing the hope we have in Christ Jesus, let us always show our love for Him through prayers of praise and thanksgiving.

Without Jesus we have no hope of heaven. In Christ we're assured of salvation and should have no fear of death. For Christians, death is just a passage from mortal life to the glorious life Jesus has prepared for us, but to the unbeliever it is eternal destruction. Today, thank God specifically for the eternal hope that we only have through Him and pray for opportunities to tell others about this hope and the joy we have in Him.



Reflection Prayer

As we near the end of our 40 days, reflect for a moment on how your prayer life has changed. How will this exercise impact your relationship with God moving forward? Today, write out a prayer below concerning anything and everything that is on your heart. God cares and is listening.

1 Peter 5:7 says “*Casting all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*”



In Ways We Cannot Express

I am unsure of how the Holy Spirit is connected to my spiritual being, but have no doubt this bond exists. Neither can I explain how my personal spirit is joined to my own corporeal body. Some things are simply beyond our ability to comprehend. One thing I do know with certainty is the Scriptures teach me the Holy Spirit knows my mind. **Romans 8:26–27** provides a window into how the Holy Spirit fills a role in our prayer life:

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

In context, Paul wrote about how both creation and Christians “groan” because of the sinful state of the world which oppressed them both (**Romans 8:18–23**). Paul looked forward, with unyielding hope, to a time of renewal and liberation from a world of suffering and oppression. Having the “firstfruits of the Spirit,” God’s people can expect sonship and redemption of their bodies when the Kingdom comes in full at Christ’s return (**Romans 8:23**).

Romans 8:23 – “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

This connection to the Holy Spirit was in view when Paul informed the Roman faithful about how the comforting and helpful Spirit would aid them in their prayer life. From this teaching we can know the Spirit acts in an intercessory role between us and God. Because of our inability to know God’s complete will for every situation, we can pray in ignorance.

In his third century commentary on this passage, Origen of Alexandria (c AD 184–253) observes:

“Just as a sick man does not ask the doctor for things which will restore him to health but rather for things which his disease longs for, so likewise we, as long as we are languishing in the weaknesses of this life, will time from time ask God for things which are not good for us. This is why the Spirit has to help us.”

Sometimes we may be praying for relief from the symptoms instead of a cure for the underlying cause. The good news is, even though we may not know what to say in our laments and petitions, the Holy Spirit hears our words. Our prayers, said aloud and in silence, are borne by the Spirit to the throne of God. The Spirit speaks with the Father using expressions we are unable to utter. Have confidence as you pray and cry out with raw feeling as the psalmists did without fear of your words being inadequate. There is a helper and comforter who will handle any shortfalls in our feeble human expressions.

For your prayer today, write down your needs and also any of their underlying causes. In addition, be sure to express your gratitude to God for providing this role for the Holy Spirit.



Matthew 6:16-18 – Fasting

Fasting is a spiritual discipline that is rarely given much attention in modern discipleship, but the early church seemed to fast frequently and fervently in their spiritual pursuits of God. Read just a few of the examples of fasting that can be seen in Scripture: Jesus' fast in **Matthew 4:2** & **Luke 4:2**, Ezra's fast in **Ezra 10:6** over the faithlessness of the exiles, Jesus' teaching in **Matthew 6:16-18**, the congregational fast seen in **Joel 2:15-16**, Paul's conversion fast in **Acts 9:9**, and **Acts 13:2**.

Fasting can come in many forms. A Christian can fast with other Christians, as a household, and of course, privately and personally. Today, consider participating in a *normal fast* (refrain from food, but drink water) if you're able and even if you've never fasted.

Jesus' words in Matthew seem to indicate that it was even assumed the early followers of Christ already had fasting as a central part of their culture and spiritual practice. Should we? When He says "and when you fast," it's difficult not to imagine that this practice was a normal practice for His audience.

His words in **Matthew 6:16-18** focus on the motive behind fasting:

"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

I don't believe it's sinful for others to know you're fasting (cf. **Joel 2:15-16**, **Acts 14:22-23**), but Jesus encourages the listeners to not make a show like the hypocrites who "disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others." Jesus desires us to fast humbly and with a mindset on the *Father* and not on what *others* may think or see. Perhaps you're reading this and have never fasted. You're in the company of the vast majority of modern, western followers of Christ. I believe many disciples are missing out on this powerful, influential spiritual practice. I'm guilty of this too, as it's hard for me to imagine not eating food for a period of time – I can't go three hours without thinking about my next bowl of ice cream!

Fasting should not be forced or coerced. Donald Whitney, author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, defines fasting as "a believer's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes." Fasting can occur in order to grieve, seek guidance, to humble oneself in God's presence, to worship, to strengthen one's prayer life, and for many other reasons. The fast I encourage you to partake in today involves 24 hours of abstaining from food and only drinking water. You may need to plan for this on another day if needed, but think ahead about how you will execute this fast. Focus this fast on strengthening your prayer life. You may write out 16 or so prayers you'll pray on the top of each hour. You might spend so many hours/minutes in prayer as a goal. There are many ways to fast for a spiritual purpose and seek God throughout the day. Do what works for you as it's about you and your relationship with the Father today.

Remember, fasting is about a spiritual purpose, not about what others may see or not see you doing. Also, remember this does not have to be a one-time event for you. You may find that this new, potentially challenging spiritual practice is a helpful way for you to connect to the Father.

Before you begin your fast pray that God will use this fast to strengthen your prayer life and relationship with Him. Pray the same prayer for those in our church family who are fasting today as well.

**If you're unable to fast from food for any reason, choose some other way to participate in this discipline. Choose to give something up today that will interrupt your life and replace it with intentional time with God.*



A Prayer for Our Deacons & Teachers

The Eastside congregation is very blessed to have outstanding deacons and Bible teachers. Our deacons lead their various ministries well, and our Bible teachers do an excellent job in teaching our children and adults. As I think about these two very important positions in the Lord's church, I am reminded of just how fortunate we are.

Just think of all the ministries here at Eastside that are effective in God's Kingdom: Adult Education, Children's Education, Family Ministry, Member Care, the Clothing Ministry, H.O.S.T., the Food Pantry, the Community Thanksgiving Meal, Trunk-or-Treat, Building Maintenance, Grounds Maintenance, and more. There is work going on behind the scenes that most never notice. Each of these works happens because of the ministry leaders and others who serve.

There are men and women at Eastside who have been unwavering, some for decades, in their efforts to teach our children the history of the Bible, and the nature of God. In our adult classes, we have men who are passionate about studying and teaching the history of the Bible and God's people. Others are highly skilled in diving into the character of God and Christ and their expectations for us. And we have Godly women who lead and teach our ladies in various classes and ministries.

Accomplishing our mission of sharing the Gospel with the lost and serving our fellow man requires the steadfast devotion of many servants. We all have responsibilities outside of these ministries - jobs, family, other ministries - and life throws many curveballs at us. It can be difficult to remain fully engaged. Prayers for strength and ministry success are vital for all who serve.

We never know just how far the influence of Bible teaching and serving others will take us. But we believe what the Hebrews writer teaches us about God's Word in **Hebrews 4**.

Hebrews 4:12 - *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*

We need to spend time every day reading and studying God's Word. It is the sword we use to defend ourselves against Satan's evil influence. And we need to go to God in prayer.

Pray about the following:

1. Our deacons and their ministries
2. Our Bible teachers and their students
3. That we will all stay connected to Christ and to each other
4. Be thankful for all that God has done for us
5. Our faith will not falter and the Lord will strengthen us



Praying for Those in Authority

I Timothy 2:1-4 tells us “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Paul strongly encouraged Timothy and the members of the early church to pray for the leaders of their land. A “king” in Paul’s time would have been anyone from the emperor to the local ruler. The ones “in high positions” were magistrates or judges, those who could rule on what should happen to a person. Paul appeared before many magistrates and ultimately appealed to Caesar. He knew what authority meant and how important it was to be heard by those in charge.

Paul encouraged Christians to pray for their leaders even when they were subject to Nero, an emperor who killed Christians for sport! God can work through all kinds of leaders to accomplish His purposes on earth.

God desires for His children to lead peaceful and quiet lives, no matter their circumstances. Christians have experienced hardship in many places and grown stronger from it. The Church has often flourished under persecution because God’s people shine in a dark world. It pleases God for His children to pray for their leaders.

Peter reminds us of the importance of being subject to rulers in **I Peter 2:13-15**, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”

Leaders make decisions that impact vast numbers of people. From the president to the governor to the mayor, each leader has a great responsibility.

Paul says in **Romans 13:1** “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”

Christians should pray for the president, the governor, and local leaders whether they agree with them or not. Have you prayed for your national, state, and local leaders lately? Remember at election times to pray that God will put leaders in office at all levels who will allow God’s people to lead peaceful and quiet lives.

Today, find out the names of those in authority in your community and state, if you don’t know who they are already. Add these specific names to your prayer list below. Be sure to thank God for the blessing of peace and for leaders who seek to do His will.

Today’s Prayer List:



A Prayer of Paul

Through a multitude of verses in Scripture, it is revealed that in prayer, our heart's requests are made known to God. Not that God is ignorant of our needs until we tell Him, but in coming to Him through prayer, we recognize Him as the source for "every good and perfect gift" and our heart reminiscences on His faithfulness and the promises He makes in Scripture:

Philippians 4:6 - *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."*

Mark 11:24 - *"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."*

Romans 8:26 - *"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."*

Oftentimes, we refer to the contents of these prayers as "our prayer requests." But in **Colossians 1:9-14**, through Paul's prayer on behalf of the believers in Colossae, we learn a bit about "prayer's request for us." C.F.D. Moule, a New Testament scholar, puts it like this, "Prayer makes two great requests. It asks for the discernment of God's will and then for the power to perform that will."

Colossians 1:9-14 says *"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."*

Looking Inwardly

As we learn from Paul's prayer in **Colossians 1**, at the heart of prayer is a desire for God's Will to be done in all things – in all aspects of our life. The first manifestation of this starts inwardly.

Today, write below some ways you feel your personal will and God's Will do not align. Then, re-read **Colossians 1:9** and pray that your heart and mind can become more in tune with God's Will.

Living Outwardly

But it does not end there; as we become more in tune with God's Will, Paul suggests that begins to be displayed outwardly. If we view prayer as aligning our *personal will* with our ever-growing understanding of God's Will, then as soon as we say 'Amen,' we must consider, "What does that prayer require of me?" If your prayer request is for a grieving brother or sister to find comfort, then prayer's request of you is to give them comfort. If your prayer request is that our lost world can find justice and peace, then prayer's request of you is to promote justice and peace. If your prayer request is that no child goes to bed hungry, then the prayer's request of you is to share liberally.

With this as our perspective, our personal life of prayer and our personal walk of life begin to sing praises to God in a unified voice. We start to *"walk in a manner worthy of the Lord"* (**Colossians 1:10**), we *"bear fruit"* (**Colossians 1:10**), and our lives are lived with thankfulness and joy despite any worldly circumstances (**Colossians 1:12**).

Today, pray that as you strive to grow in your understanding of God's Will, your personal walk as a believer will be strengthened by God's power (**Colossians 1:11**).

Pray that God will give you the endurance, regardless of earthly circumstances, to live a life reflective of your citizenship in His Kingdom (**Colossians 1:11-13**).