

WC ENCOUNTER GROUPS CURRICULUM
WEEK ONE: PRAYER
A MORE EXCELLENT WAY



A More Excellent Way: Prayer

OPENING PRAYER:

Dear Loving God, have mercy on us, we have missed the mark. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

ENCOUNTERING GOD:

How have you seen God at work this week?

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WEEKLY SCRIPTURE READING:

Read Luke 18:9-14

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

REFLECTION:

Why pray?

Prayer connects us to God because the act of prayer is an acknowledgement that we need a power beyond ourselves; we need the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Effective prayer requires us to humble ourselves, admitting that we need help: which is precisely why we are taught to bow our heads or kneel while praying. When we adopt this spiritual and physical posture in prayer, we don't see God as a vending machine of miracles. Instead we pray that God's will is done in our lives and that our hearts will be aligned with God's purposes.

My friends, we encounter God through an active prayer life.

Effective prayer requires us to make room in our lives for God and other people. The best way to strengthen our relationship with a person or with God is through communication, which requires us to set aside time to talk and actively listen. Praying is simply talking and listening to God. The more time we spend in prayer, the more space God occupies in our hearts.

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John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, referred to prayer as a means of Grace- meaning we can experience the unmerited and unconditional love of God that transforms us, heals us, cleans us, and grows us.

Grace is simply the loving activity of the Spirit in our lives. So, when we don't know what to say when we pray, it is the loving activity of the Spirit of God that knows our hearts and intercedes on our behalf. The Spirit speaks for us and expresses to the Father and the Son what we cannot verbally communicate. (Romans 8:26-27)

Prayer connects us to each other. When we pray for others, it is called intercessory prayer. We can intercede on the behalf of others, just as the Spirit intercedes on our behalf. When people share their prayer requests and praise reports with us, they are not fodder for gossip - they are opportunities for us to share the load and to celebrate with them. Through actively listening to both their prayer requests and praise reports, we know what we should be praying for on behalf of our brothers and sisters. When we pray for each other, we move toward a more balanced prayer life that does not just revolve around ourselves and our immediate family. When God answers prayers of group members, we share in the celebration.

Prayer offers us the opportunity to live out the greatest commandment because prayer is a means of showing our love for God and our neighbor. We make room in our hearts for God; God isn't just a guest. God has a residence sitting at the head of the table. Those whom we call friend, brother, and sister all have a place at the table.

How do I pray?

Impressive words are not necessary, just a heart that desires to connect and commune with God. The tax collector simply says "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" It was only seven words, yet the Bible says that his prayer was granted. "This man went down to his home justified," meaning the sinner was forgiven and was

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made righteous. Prayer is not a monologue where we ask for wishes to be granted; we should also create space to hear from God, to discern God’s will.

There are at least four kinds of prayer. Each can be prayed separately, or one prayer may encompass all or some of the four types: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

Adoration is stating the greatness of God when we pray. For example, Psalms 86:10 says, “For you are great and do marvelous deeds: you alone are God.” Confession is stating our sins (the ways we have missed the mark). In our scripture lesson today, the tax collector confessed that he was “a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

Thanksgiving is giving thanks for all that God has done, is doing, and will do in our lives. It also includes giving thanks for all God is doing in the lives of the people we love, the church, and the world. In our scripture lesson, the Pharisee offers a prayer of thanksgiving (Luke 18:11). The problem with his prayer was that he used his prayer to exalt himself, while putting others down. His prayer pointed towards his own greatness in relation to others rather than the greatness of God, who enables us to do great things.

Supplication is making our requests of God. In our scripture today, the request is for mercy (Luke 18:13). During our prayer of supplication we can make intercession- meaning we lift up prayers on the behalf of others.

We conclude our prayers by saying “In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen!” We make our request in Jesus name because we believe that His name has authority and power.

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REFLECTION CONTINUED:

Before we pray, we should take time to evaluate ourselves. We can accomplish this by asking ourselves a few questions:

- What do I adore about God? What amazes me about God?
- What prayers has God answered for me?
- What and who am I thankful for?
- Where have I fallen short or missed the mark?
- Have I been a good steward of the resources God has entrusted to me?
- What do I need God to do for me? My loved ones? My enemies? The world? The Church?

We should pray with the right attitude. Pharisees were considered pious and at the top of the social and religious hierarchy, while tax collectors were viewed as sinners (on the same level as prostitutes) due to the excessive collection fees that they charged. The text tells us that the Pharisee stood up by himself. His contempt for others created distance between him and the other people who were gathered to pray, especially the tax collector. The word “Pharisee” actually means “separated ones.” There is nothing wrong with being set part for a godly purpose; however, it appears that the Pharisee thought that he was not only “separated” but also superior. He felt his obedience to the law made him closer to God and superior to sinners. He was blinded by his pride.

The tax collector would not even look up to heaven when he prayed, which may not sound unusual to us today. However, in Jesus’ day the prayer posture was to look to heaven with your hands raised. The early church was influenced by this parable and it changed our prayer posture to bowing our heads and folded hands, to reflect humility. We should always approach God from a posture of humility, recognizing our need for God and being willing to accept if God does not answer our prayers according to our timelines, or the way in which we would like.

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GROUP REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Encounter The Head:

What is stewardship? What is prayer?

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Is there a right or wrong way to pray? What does the Pharisee get right? What does he get wrong? What does the tax collector get right?

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Encounter The Heart:

How do we encounter God in prayer... and how are we encountered by God?

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Share a time that a prayer was answered by God. What did you learn about God? What did you learn about yourself?

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Encounter The Hands:

How do you begin a prayer discipline? What times are you planning to pray? How frequent are you planning to pray?

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PRAYER REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Take a moment to write answers the following questions that we discussed previously in our reflection:

- What do I adore about God? What amazes me about God?
- What prayers has God answered for me?
- What and who am I thankful for?
- Where have I fallen short or missed the mark?
- Have I been a good steward of the resources God has entrusted to me?
- What do I need God to do for me? My loved ones? My enemies? The world? The Church?

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Now, incorporate the answers to these questions into your prayers over the course of this week: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.



PRAISE AND PRAYER REQUESTS

Please go around the group and have each person share a praise for this week and a prayer request/concern.

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CLOSING PRAYER

Have a volunteer lead closing prayer: asking for prayer concerns and lifting up the needs of the group.

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DAILY REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

We encourage everyone to do a daily reflection. This can be done alone, as a couple, or with your family. This spiritual practice will help answer the questions you have and it will improve your ability to see where God is at work in your life, and in the lives of those around you. Please answer the following questions during your personal devotional time at the end of the day.

Where have you seen God today? For the children, we say, “what made you happy today?”

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What broke your heart or made you sad today?

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What good thing did you do for someone else today?

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What are you thankful for today?

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WEEK FOUR

Supplies:

- Bible
- Markers, colors, map pencils
- Note cards or strips of paper
- Sacred Candle & Matches/Lighter
- Envelope
- Refrigerator magnets

WELCOMING GOD:

Gather together, and welcome God into this time and space through the lighting of a candle. Take this moment to pause briefly and sit quietly in this light for a few moments allowing time for everyone to relax their body, mind, and spirit for this time. In these moments, the invitation is to become aware of God's presence with and amongst you as a family.

SHARING WITH GOD AND ONE ANOTHER:

Say: "If anything is on our minds that makes it difficult for us to focus, let's share it now and then let it go."

- Whoever leads this portion might share what is on his or her mind to model this. Give time for each person to respond. When everyone has responded that would like to, invite everyone to place their hands out and lift them up as we give these distractions to God.

OR you can invite the family to pray together as one person leads, saying the following:

"Dear Loving God, The One who knows our hearts, celebrates our victories, grieves with us during our losses, and gives us the strength to overcome our challenges. Please help us to let go of the distractions we name now, so that we can openly share with our family and may encounter you in a special way today. Our distractions are... (let there be silence here, so everyone has an opportunity to name aloud what is distracting them).

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen."

ENCOUNTERING GOD:

Read aloud: Mark 18:9-14.

- Take turns reading the Scripture or have a different family member read the Scripture each week.

"He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-

collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

ENCOUNTERING EACH OTHER:

Discussion Questions

- What types of things do you pray for?
- What are your favorite things to talk to God about?
- What did you notice about the prayers in Jesus’s story?
- Parents, share with your children the answer to this question: who taught you to pray?

Say: The tax-collector prays for mercy because he knows that he needs God each and every day. The Pharisee’s prayer thanks God for the fact that the Pharisee isn’t like the sinners and the tax-collector. He is happy that he is “better” than other people and does not seem to notice God’s role in his life. He’s not loving God or others very well in this moment. But, the tax-collector knows he needs God. He prays for God to show him mercy. When we pray, it isn’t so much about the words we say or whether we fold our hands and bow our heads or about who we are. It is about our attitude—and trusting God more than we trust ourselves.

Activity (Option 1):

1. Take turns sharing something about God that you love. When everyone has shared, say “we love you, God.”
2. Take turns sharing one thing that you are thankful for today. When everyone has shared, say together: “thank you, God”
3. Take turns sharing something you hope God helps you with. When everyone has shared, say together “help us, God.”

Activity (Option 2):

Decorate an envelope and write the words “Prayer Pocket” on it. Then, stick the envelope to your refrigerator with a magnet. Place a stack of notecards or strips of paper nearby with a pencil. Throughout this next week, invite family members to write down people, places, or things they want to pray for on the cards or strips of paper, and stick those inside the prayer pocket. Each day, empty the pocket out when you say prayers together with each family member, randomly grabbing slips of paper from the envelope and offering a prayer for what is on the paper.

ENCOUNTERING GOD TOGETHER:

Say: “May we pray together as a family...

Let us share our prayers for the world: for our country and leaders, for other countries and their leaders...

Let us share our prayers for the church, ministers, and spiritual leaders...

Let us share our prayers for our teachers, first responders, friends, and others in the community...

Let us share our prayers for our family and our own specific needs...”

If you would like to record the people for whom you pray, use the next few lines to do so:

ENCOUNTERING TRANSFORMATION TOGETHER:

Pray aloud together:

God, we welcomed you here and read Your Word,
we prayed and we spent time with you,
we rested in your love for us,
and we did this all together.

Now, we promise to love one another and others as you love us.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

BLESSING ONE ANOTHER FOR OUR ENCOUNTERS WITH THE WORLD:

Invite family members to bless one another using any of the examples below or their own blessings.

Examples:

- “I love you. God loves you. I pray God blesses you.”
- “God loves you exactly like you are—and so do I.”
- “I love the gifts God has given you and how you bless the world with them.”