



August 4 – September 1, 2024

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

## Week 1: The Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)

1. What stood out to you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you? Was there anything which made you uncomfortable, or with which you disagreed?
2. Read Matthew 13:10-17 and 34-35.
  - Why did Jesus speak to the crowd in parables?
  - The quote in v. 35 is from Psalm 78, which references using parables to pass on to future generations the story of God's loving engagement with Israel. How can stories communicate truth down through the ages in a way that direct teaching cannot?
  - What do these verses tell us about how to listen to parables?
3. What is your favorite parable, and why is it meaningful to you?
4. Read Matthew 25:1-13.
  - If you are familiar with this parable, how have you understood it in the past?
  - What do you think it means to be ready for the return of the bridegroom?
  - What do you think the crowd would have thought of the bridegroom's harsh treatment of the girls?
  - How does this challenge a simple reading of the parable?
5. Which (if any) of the following possible messages of the parable resonate most with you, and why?
  - Keep watch
  - Don't let opportunities pass you by
  - Put Jesus' words into practice
  - Trust in God's kindness and sufficiency
6. After you have shared your answer to question 5 above, take some time to pray for each other. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, talk to God about what you feel the parable is saying to you right now.

### Practice for the week: Being awake

**Prepare.** Begin to let go of all thought of the future or past. Focus on your breathing in this present moment. As you inhale, allow the Holy Spirit to fill you. As you exhale, let go of any negative emotions.

**Be awake to where you are.** Consider the environment around you—your space, the natural beauty you may see, smells, sounds, the people nearby. Truly notice these things and thank God for providing them.

**Be awake to who you are.** Ask God to show you what you are feeling at this moment. Where is there anxiety or concern? What are your emotions? Are you happy or sad? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what you are trying to control, and release it to God.

***Be awake to God.*** Rest in the awareness that God is within you and all around you, and that God knows you and loves you.

To close this time of prayer, thank God for being present and for loving you, and slowly return to your activities, bringing the Holy Spirit with you. Repeat often.

## Week 2: A Widow and a Judge (Luke 18:1-8)

1. What stood out to you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you? Was there anything which made you uncomfortable, or with which you disagreed?
2. Read Matthew 13:10-15. What do you think Jesus means here and why is he quoting this passage from Isaiah? What does this suggest to us about the approach we should take to interpreting Jesus' parables today?
3. Read this week's parable in Luke 18:1-8 in the New Revised Standard Version. With whom do you most immediately identify in this parable and why? Read the parable again and this time try to place yourself in each of the characters' shoes: the widow, the judge, and widow's opponent. Can you describe a time when you have felt like each of them? How did you feel?
4. Now read the same passage again in New International Version. Do you notice any differences? Does this version make you feel any different about your identifications and reflections on the above question?
5. In the message on Sunday, we considered several different ways of interpreting this parable:
  - Prayer is all about badgering God until God caves.
  - Don't give up on prayer because it takes time (even with God).
  - God will eventually wreak vengeance on our opponents.
  - Be careful about equating preferred outcomes (that benefit you) with justice.
  - In seeking justice, don't be manipulative or vengeful.
  - Don't let fear prevent you from acting justly.

What are the positives and negatives of each of these interpretations and what might be other more helpful ways of applying this parable to our own lives?

### Practice for the week

Take some time this week to read and reflect on this parable. Try reading it in different versions of the bible and contemplate the differing implications of the words. Write out a brief summary of what the parable means to you. There's no one single interpretation, so just allow the parable to speak to you personally and in a holistic way. Throughout the week, come back to this summary and reflect on how it challenges the way you live, how you view different people, how you view yourself, and even God. How might this parable change you?

## Week 3: A Pharisee and a Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)

1. What stood out to you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you? Was there anything which made you uncomfortable, or with which you disagreed?
2. Read this week's parable in Luke 18:9-14. With whom do you most immediately identify in this parable and why? Can you describe a time when you have felt like the pharisee? Can you describe a time when you have felt like the tax collector? With which individuals and groups in our own culture today do we tend to associate the pharisee? With which individuals and groups in our own culture today do we tend to associate the tax collector?
3. Read verse 11 again. In what ways could the pharisee's prayer be honest, just, and compassionate? In what ways could it be dishonest, self-righteous, and judgmental? How might this prayer compare with some of our own thoughts (if not prayers!) about ourselves?
4. In the message on Sunday, we considered how in verse 12 the pharisee is far exceeding the religious requirement for righteousness. What might be a positive outcome of living "above and beyond" in this way? What might be a negative outcome?
5. How does the pharisee's view of the tax collector compare to the tax collector's own view of their self? What does this say about each of them and how might that impact how we view ourselves?
6. In verse 14, "... *this one went down to their home justified rather than the other...*" could also be translated "... *this one went down to their home justified as well as the other...*", or even "... *this one went down to their home justified because of the other...*" What are the different implications of each translation, and which do you think fits best in the context of this passage?

### Practice for the week: The Examen

Jesus taught us not to be self-righteous or to look down on others (Luke 18:9). But there are all kinds of ways we can do this, consciously and unconsciously, as we go about daily life. This week take some time each evening to reflect on your day, seeking to be more aware of times where you may have been judgmental.

The ancient Ignatian practice of Examen is a helpful technique for this. Sit quietly alone and take a moment to center yourself. Then "re-live" your day in your imagination by allowing your thoughts to guide you through the day's events. As you do this, focus particularly on your interactions with others—in your family, at work or school, in your neighborhood or online. These "interactions" might be your internal thoughts or attitudes, or they could be actual conversations and encounters. Do this with self-honesty but without judging yourself. Simply notice and reflect on the following:

At what moments in your day were your thoughts and actions judgmental or did you look down on someone?

- What happened?
- What was the source of your judgment (why did you feel that way)?

- Were you aware at the time that you were being judgmental?
- What was the outcome?

For each of these situations what would a more merciful perspective have looked like?

- How would this have affected what happened?
- How might the outcomes have been different?
- Does anything inhibit extending mercy for you?

When you have finished reflecting, continue to sit quietly without self-judgment. Allow yourself to sink deeply into God's presence, mercy, and acceptance. Let this consciousness pervade your awareness and embrace it. Imagine the people you've encountered today equally immersed in the same mercy and acceptance and open your heart to them.

Intentionally take this consciousness into the following day each time.

## Week 4: The Wise and Foolish Builders (Matthew 7:24-27)

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? In what ways did it stretch your thinking?
2. Read the parable in Matthew 7:24-27. In the message, the speaker said, "The foundation is not the words of Jesus. The foundation is Jesus. And we build our house on Jesus by following in the way of Jesus." Do you agree or disagree with that statement? Why or why not?
3. In the message, the speaker said, "Good works built on the sand of self-righteousness will not stand." How can we distinguish between self-righteousness and true righteousness that comes from following Jesus? Can you identify areas in your life where you might be building on the "sand" of self-righteousness?
4. According to the message, why is it dangerous to rely on good works as a foundation for our faith? How can we ensure that our good works are an outflow of our relationship with Jesus and a transformed heart rather than a means of "being a good person" or self-justification?
5. How can being part of a faith community help us build on the "rock"? What role does accountability, encouragement, and shared wisdom play in strengthening our spiritual foundation?
6. Reflect on your current spiritual practices and beliefs. What aspects of your life might be built on the "sand" of human wisdom or cultural values rather than the "rock" of Christ's teachings?
7. What are some practical steps you can take this week to shift from building on "sand" to building on "rock"? How can the group support each other in making these changes?

### Practice for the week: Sacred Reading of Scripture – Matthew 7:24-27

This is a way of praying with Scripture that has been used for centuries by followers of Jesus and is often called *Lectio Divina*, which is Latin for sacred or divine reading. A regular practice of *Lectio Divina* cultivates the ability to listen deeply to Scripture and allow God's presence to open our lives. It helps us listen for the still small voice of God speaking to us personally here and now and to grow in awareness of God's presence with us, in us, and around us. We interact with the text of Scripture, but unlike Bible study, we do not analyze or dissect it. We listen quietly and let the words settle into us as we quiet our thinking to receive them deeply into our hearts.

There are many ways to engage with *Lectio Divina*, but four steps are commonly used: read, meditate, respond, and rest. (If you prefer to listen to the Scripture rather than read it, there are some great apps and websites for that, such as [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com).)

**Read:** Read the passage of Scripture. This is best done slowly and intentionally with an awareness of God's presence speaking through the text. Simply listen for God's voice in this moment. Don't search or seek out the meaning on your own, but rather wait and listen for something to emerge. When a word or phrase seems to settle on you, take it in and just sit with it in silence.

**Meditate:** Read the text again for the purpose of “hearing” or “seeing” God in it. This is a deep searching of the heart. Ponder it, reflect on it, and ask how this applies to your own experience and life. How is God reaching you right now, speaking to you in the word or phrase?

**Respond:** The third reading is to respond to God, expressing honestly whatever is happening in your heart and spirit as a result of listening. There may be joy, tears, awe, reverence, even confusion – give any emotion or thought that arises freely to God at this time. And listen for how God might want you to turn, move, or act because of what you’ve heard.

**Rest:** Finally, let your mind and emotions settle to rest in silence and simply seek to love and be loved by God. Anytime distracting thoughts arise, just return to the word that stood out in the reading, repeat it, and allow other thoughts to fade. Allow this “sacred word” to symbolize all your love for God and your willingness to give God all your attention. Sit in the presence of God and use the word as a window through which to gaze upon God and allow the light and love of God to stream into your heart and spirit.



## Week 5: Lost Things (Luke 15:1-31)

1. What was most helpful to you in the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that surprised you or that made you rethink these familiar stories?
2. Read Luke 15:1-10.
  - In what ways are these two stories similar, and in what ways are they different?
  - Do you see any significance in these similarities and differences?
  - Given the context of v. 1-3, why do you think Jesus told these stories?
  - How do you think the different groups of people in Jesus' audience would have reacted to the stories?
3. In v. 7 and v. 10, the author of Luke gives an interpretation for these parables. What do these stories tell us about repentance?
4. Read Luke 15:11-31.
  - What do you think motivated the younger son to (i) leave home? (ii) return home? (iii) ask to be a hired servant?
  - Why do you think the older son was so angry? In what ways was he also "lost" to the father?
  - The speaker on Sunday described the father as "rather foolish." Why do you agree or disagree with this assessment?
5. Which character, animal, or object do you identify with most at the moment, and why? Now imagine yourself as a different character, animal, or object. What might you learn from this new identification?
6. If you are reflecting on these questions in a group, take some time to share with one another how aspects of these stories relate to your own life at this time, and pray for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, speak to God about how you feel these stories relate to you. Rejoice in God's "foolish," extravagant love for you.

### Prayer for the week: Where, who, how?

Take some time this week to slowly and prayerfully read through Luke chapter 15.

Ask God to speak to you as you contemplate these questions:

- **Where am I lost?** Where am I in need of help? Is there an area of my life where I need to repent (rethink or change direction)?
- **Who else is lost?** Are there people I need to reach out to and help bring into community?
- **How can I love extravagantly?** Even if it seems "foolish," can I extend love to someone who does not deserve it and/or may not reciprocate?