



## Week 1 Preaching Resources: Prayer

**Scripture Passage:** Romans 8:26-27

**Focus Statement:** As we learn a rhythm of prayer, we become connected to God in new and exciting ways. Prayer is the breath of Christian life.

**ME:** Share a time that you've been asked to pray because you were the pastor/preacher, or possibly just the assumed "good pray-er" in that situation.

**WE:** How often do we pray outside of Sunday morning or at meals? And how do we define prayer in our lives? When it comes to spiritual disciplines like prayer, the more we exercise it, the stronger and healthier we become. Prayer is something that everyone can do. We all deal with this issue of "being a good pray-er or bad pray-er." But the scripture teaches us that the power of prayer is in praying honestly and fervently, and that it ought to be a regular practice rather than just an as-needed or one-time event. Even the most faithful people struggle with prayer, but it is not about "getting it right," but rather developing our prayer life as a discipline. The word discipline comes from the same root as disciple – meaning "pupil" (or learner). As we are followers of Jesus Christ, we learn spiritual practices like prayer that help to shape our lives following God's example.

**GOD:** As our faith deepens, and we develop the exercise of prayer regularly in our daily life, it can become second nature to us – as natural as breathing. The Holy Spirit is the breath of life, and when we develop the discipline of prayer, that "spiritual breathing" comes to us more easily.

In the text we see this idea of the Spirit 'interceding'. Verse 26 says even when we don't know what to say or how to pray, when we are in tune with the Spirit, the Spirit is hearing our heart and our faith, not just our words, and the Spirit helps us to pray. Prayer is not just a thing we do, but prayer is directly connected to what our relationship with God looks like. Even when prayers don't seem to flow how we want them to, if they are rooted in the Spirit, then they still connect us to God in fellowship.

Intercession in Korean literally means 'help.' So, when we cannot pray as we want with words, if we are willing to be honest with ourselves and vulnerable with God, then the prayer is still genuine, because the Spirit helps us. We can even invite the Spirit to intercede in our prayers when we struggle with how or what to pray. The Holy Spirit can manifest in many different ways: sometimes in song, or in tears and lying prostrate, or rocking, or speaking in words or a language that no one else in the room understands. Part of the spiritual discipline of praying is understanding how the Spirit is calling us to communicate with God at any given moment.

The end of verse 27, "the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God," points to another important feature of prayer – being rooted in God's will for our lives. Sometimes our human desires do not fall in line with God's



will. This was true even of Jesus, who prayed in Gethsemane, “My father if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matt. 26:39). It is okay, even necessary, to express our pain and our desires to God. But part of growing in prayer is recognizing that at times God’s will for our lives may not be the same as our own (the end of Jesus’ sentence, above, is “yet not what I want but what you want”). Prayer is not a one-way conversation; it also involves listening to God, learning and becoming receptive to God’s will for us. We can be intentional about asking and listening for this. As we grow in a life of devotion and meditation, we can become more open to understanding the ‘heart of God.’

**YOU:** How do we make sure that we are committing to growing in our prayer lives? What would it be like if prayer became an ongoing conversation for us and not just something, we do every so often? Are you making daily space in your life for prayer and listening to God? What daily rhythm or practice can you do to begin practicing this more in your own life? Giving concrete suggestions is helpful here. What would it look like to begin by setting an alarm to go off every day and then you pray a one line prayer when it goes off, increasing to twice daily, etc.? It is about developing a routine.

**WE:** What does it look like for us as a community to begin helping each other become dedicated and stronger in our prayer life? And more than just praying together, how can we sharpen our skills with one another to develop healthier prayer lives?

(Consider teaching a way to pray through a simple practice, like the “Jesus prayer,” or even develop a rhythm of who to collectively pray for each day.)



## Week 2 Preaching Resources: Scripture

### Scripture Passage: Psalm 1:1-3

**Focus Statement:** Reading and meditating on Scripture lay the foundation for Christian life.

**ME:** Tell a story about how a passage from scripture spoke to you differently at different times in your life (e.g. Prodigal Son, identifying with different characters). Such stories show what a life rooted in scripture looks like and how it becomes incorporated into the stories of our own lives.

**WE:** We all have things in our lives that shift in meaning over time, or things towards which our attitudes change (e.g., Did you like coffee when you were six? Do you like it now?) Tastes, skills and relationships change and develop over time with experience and practice. But we have to spend time with something on a consistent basis for its true potential to develop in our lives (e.g., our relationship with God needs time and attention through scripture, just as our relationship with others needs time and attention through communication, care, etc.).

**GOD:** What does it mean to delight in the law of the Lord (verse 2)? We think of all the “thou shalt nots” but scripture’s purpose is not condemnation; it is not simply a list of do’s and don’ts. When we think of the Bible as only one thing (e.g., do’s/don’ts), we minimize its value for the whole of our lives.

Scripture is life-giving and life-sustaining. It is not a quick-fix or fad diet; studying scripture is a lifestyle change. There is beauty and grace in the midst of it, even when it’s really difficult. Verse 3 gives the image of trees planted by streams of water. We can think of scripture as the stream and the soil that we plant ourselves by and in. With time and consistency, scripture helps us to realign our lives, to be rooted and to grow. Imagine a tree that was always being uprooted and moved from place to place or that was only ever given small amounts of water. It would never take root and it would never grow. It would never “yield fruit” (of a faithful life, a strong relationship with God).

When we meditate on scripture, we can learn to find our story within it. All of our triumphs and screw-ups are in the Bible - it is not just an ancient, irrelevant text. Because God has chosen to be present to us through scripture, the discipline of reading, studying and meditating on scripture is a life-sustaining one.



**YOU:** Consider teaching your church about a scripture reading practice/tool like “lectio divina.” Here is a helpful video about it: [https://youtu.be/RZ\\_Vm-E31B0](https://youtu.be/RZ_Vm-E31B0). You may find other ways that are more helpful for you. Disciplines don’t always feel like they’re achieving that “wow” experience we’re hoping for. Stick with it - it’s not about achieving “results” right away. It’s about building and shaping a life through commitment. There is no one “right” way; the important thing is to do it regularly and remain committed. That said, reading and meditating on scripture, just as with any spiritual discipline, isn’t about feeling guilty when you don’t do it or don’t keep up with it right away! There’s always a new day.

**WE:** What would it look like if we all engaged in this discipline together? Offer some concrete ways that your community can do this (small group, intro group to lectio divina, giving bookmarks as a reminder, etc). Imagine what a whole forest of trees planted by the stream of scripture would look like!



## Week 3 Preaching Resources: Fasting

### Scripture Passage: Matthew 6:16-18

**Focus Statement:** Fasting is meant to change our hearts and deepen our relationship with God, yet sometimes we turn it into a diet or a show.

**ME:** What is something someone assumed you did or were doing because you were in the wrong location or you fit the look? For example, people who wear yoga pants aren't always doing yoga! Did you admit the truth or let them believe what they thought?

**WE:** For many of us we have included fasting in our Lenten practice (e.g., fasting from sugar, caffeine, carbs, etc.) without growing or learning from the fast. But fasting is not about dieting; it's about denying ourselves something in order to refocus our minds and hearts, and to deepen our faith. Fasting isn't for show!

**GOD:** In Matt. 6:1-18, Jesus describes three common spiritual disciplines in his time (almsgiving, prayer, and fasting). He was warning about becoming like religious hypocrites - doing these spiritual disciplines for show without having hearts changed by them. The point Jesus makes about all these practices is that they are meaningful and worshipful when they are done with the intention of worshiping God, rather than trying to make a good impression or prove oneself in front of other people.

In Jesus' time, anointing with oil was a symbol of joy, but people usually fasted and put ashes on their heads when they were mourning. So, when Jesus instructs, "when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face," he is directing them to do the opposite of what would normally be expected when fasting! Jesus is really trying to make a point here! Verse 18 tells us that what we fast from should be between God and us, no one else. By making it secretive, Jesus is emphasizing that this is a personal and private decision, not meant to be made for or by other people.

Fasting is a less common spiritual discipline now than it was in Jesus' time and it is more common in some cultures than others. But fasting can definitely be a worshipful and transformative spiritual discipline for some people. It is about more than *what* we give up or even how well we stick to what we are fasting from (which can be different for different people). It helps us to remember that we worship God not only with our minds and hearts, but with our whole bodies. It is a tangible way of practicing sacrifice for God's sake. It can help us focus on God and prayer, just as Jesus fasted for forty days during his temptation in the wilderness. Fasting is not meant to be an isolated practice but can be integrated as part of a worshipful life.

**YOU:** Have you given something up this Lent? Is it something that you plan on returning to when this season is over? Is it mildly inconvenient or is it truly sacrificial? This may be an appropriate time to note that if people struggle with disordered eating or are trying to go on a diet or lose weight, fasting from food is likely not a wise choice. It can too



easily exacerbate these issues, which is not only not worshipful but potentially harmful. They may choose to fast from something else (e.g. watching TV, spending money unnecessarily, etc.) or focus on another spiritual discipline. Fasting should never be or become about not nourishing or caring for our bodies, which are given to us by God.

**WE:** We can choose to fast or renew our fast at any point. We can choose to change what we are fasting from or shift how we are fasting. Fasting calls us to be uncomfortable so we can become more aware of what comforts us, turn to God with purpose, and deepen our connection with God. Consider Pope Francis' words below:

Do you want to fast this Lent?

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.



## Week 4 Preaching Resources: Confession

### Scripture Passage: 1 John 1:5-9

**Focus Statement:** Confessing our sins brings us out of the darkness of the world and into the light of living as a Christ follower.

**ME:** Share a time when you found the need to confess to others something that was holding you down as a Christian. Describe how making that confession was liberating or transformative or, alternatively, how not making that confession led to continued suffering.

**WE:** We all have things in our lives that are burdens, whether it be sin, brokenness, struggles, etc. Our natural reaction is to hide those parts of ourselves from each other. However, with Jesus as Lord, we can let go of those burdens in the community of faith.

**GOD:** This passage highlights the fact that within God there is no darkness, there is no brokenness, there is nothing but light. It also highlights that if we do not walk in the light with God, we are part of the darkness. As broken creatures, as humans, we often find ourselves walking in the dark. How do we find ourselves in union with God again to enjoy the fullness of life? We must confess our sins, as verse nine suggests. Confessing our sins allows us to experience forgiveness and find ourselves living in God's light once more.

Metanoia is the Greek word for repentance. The translation into English does not fully grasp the depth of what it means--that one's mind does a literal turning from one way of a life to another. Repentance means moving our lives from darkness into light, and we can only learn to live in the light if we confess our sins before God, bringing it all out into the open. This repentance involves not only bringing to light our wrongdoings and shortcomings, but also wholeheartedly desiring and committing to live in light and righteousness, in just communion with God.

Confession is also something that we are tasked to do--not just something that God does without our action. God never walks away from God's covenant with us, but we often walk away from our covenant with God. While God is always waiting for us to return, if we want to experience this forgiveness and light, it is up to us to make the move back to God through confession and repentance.



**YOU:** The core and basis of confession is being honest with God in prayer. These prayers can be private, but there are also times when a more outward confession to God, with a trusted fellow Christian, is called for and can be a profound release. Encourage your congregation to grow in this practice concretely (e.g., share one thing with a trusted friend, or pastor - someone who will not judge). There's also another side to this - being there to hear and bear the confessions of others with them without judgment. The most important thing to remember and remind each other of, is that all is forgiven in Jesus Christ.

**WE:** A confessional church is a church that shares each other's burdens and proclaims Christ's Lordship in the community around them. It is simultaneously inward and outward, devotion and proclamation. (If you're a church that practices the passing of the peace, this may be a time to remind the congregation that this practice is a demonstration of our common vulnerability but also our common reconciliation in Christ, not just a time to chat with our pew mates.)



## Week 5 Preaching Resources: Worship

### Scripture Passage: 1 Corinthians 10:31-33

**Focus Statement:** The spiritual discipline of worship is not (just) about showing up to church on Sunday! It is about weaving worship through our everyday lives in different ways.

**ME:** Share about a time when you were pushed to worship in a way that was uncomfortable for you. How did it make you feel? How did it affect your understanding of worship?

**WE:** We have all experienced moments when we were not sure if what we were doing was “really worship” or wondered about “what worship truly was?” Perhaps we have felt as though we were worshipping when we were doing something outside of the church--standing at the edge of the ocean, climbing a mountain, gathered around a meal with friends and family? Scripture tells us that everything we do is worship--from our breathing to our eating, as long as it is done with the intention of praising God.

**GOD:** There are no real standards for “how” to worship--no prescriptions on how many prayers need to be said, or how many verses of the hymns need be sung, or out of what hymnal they must be sung. Worship starts with the intention that everything that is done in a day is done to give glory to God. It is important that we remember that God does not require a specific bulletin or that there’s a particular order of worship that most pleases God, but our worship--both public and private--should be done with the intention to bring glory to God. It is not about perfection; it is about living our lives as disciples.

Verse 31 tells us that no matter what we do--whether we are living or breathing, eating or drinking, whatever we do--we should do it for God, to give glory and show gratitude. This opens up the possibility and freedom of all sorts of regular daily activities becoming acts of worship. The point is not to diminish the importance of worshipping in church or other traditional ways but to expand worship into a way of life, including and yet going beyond worship as we often think of it.

In the context of this passage, the apostle Paul is talking about Christians eating and drinking with people of other religions (e.g., the imperial cult) or eating food purchased from them. Paul is arguing against those who would say it is not lawful to do this. He is arguing against rigid ways of thinking about how to live out our faith. Not only is it permissible to eat and drink with people of other religions, Paul says, but because of the freedom we have in Jesus, these acts and every single thing we do can (and should!) become acts of worship! Kindness and openness to the hospitality of others (verse 32) even turn these regular moments into an opportunity to witness our faith in God to them. Paul encourages the Corinthians to be thoughtful about what they choose to do or not do in the company of other people, especially non-Christians, so that God is glorified by the way they interact with others and so that they do not hurt or harm others.



**YOU:** How do you worship? Where do you feel most connected to God? What element in the worship service you usually attend that connects you with God? What disconnects you? How does being aware of what makes you feel connected shift how you think about what it means to worship? Encourage congregants to think outside of the box about how they worship God and how they can turn daily activities into worshipful moments through transforming intention.

**WE:** How is our community a safe place to explore and express different paths of worship? How are different gifts and interests honored in the life of the church? In what ways can we grow to be more open to and accepting of different expressions of worship? How can we integrate different paths of worship in our communal life? How do we begin to look at worship as not confined to a particular experience (a worship service) but central to our everyday lives?



## Passion/Palm Sunday Preaching Resources: Silence

**Scripture Passage:** Mark 14: 26-41; (Note: this is an excerpt from the Passion narrative, Mark 14:1-15:47)

**Focus Statement:** When we practice being silent, we can deepen our connection with God.

**ME:** Open up about your experience and level of comfort with silence. Have you had moments of connection with God or others in silence? Does silence make you uncomfortable? If so, why?

**WE:** We all have a relationship with silence, whether we've thought about it or not. Some of us enjoy silence. Some of us wish we had more silence in our lives. Silence makes some of us uncomfortable. We feel the need to fill our time with "noise" - whether literal or metaphorical. Moreover, some of us have been unjustly silenced. How do you feel when there is a silent pause in a conversation? Does it depend who you're with?

**GOD:** Many churches celebrate Palm Sunday this week, but it is also Passion Sunday, when we remember the final period of Jesus' life, the period of suffering leading to death ("passion" is from the Latin "patior," "to suffer, endure, bear"). In contrast to the loud praises of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, the passion story is much quieter and more somber. The excerpts here show how silence played a key role in Jesus' last days, and how it can help us tune into God's will for our lives.

Jesus intentionally takes time away from all the busyness of the Passover holiday and tense conversations with his disciples (see John 14:1-31) to be in quiet prayer with God. This is a common practice of Jesus, we might even say a spiritual discipline, throughout the gospels (see, for example, Mark 1:35, 6:30-32, Matt 14:13). In this quiet time, Jesus asks God that, if possible, could he be spared the suffering that is to come but then turns it back over to God, "yet not what I want, but what you want" (14:36). It is in creating the space and silence to *listen* for God's will that Jesus hears and finds it. This practice of listening to God's will is also the theme of the Old Testament lectionary reading for Passion Sunday (Isaiah 50:4-9a). And in order to truly listen, we must practice being quiet.

Consider contrasting Jesus' approach to silence with that of his disciples. Jesus takes a few disciples to Gethsemane and asks them to stay awake and keep watch while he prays. Every time he returns to them, he finds them sleeping. How often do we tune out or turn our brains off when faced with scary and sad situations? How often does silence make us uncomfortable? Instead of using that quiet time away from the other disciples to pray or simply keep watch as asked, they avoid the silence by falling asleep.

Just moments before, Jesus had predicted his disciples would desert him. Peter and all the others were quick to say they would not leave Jesus. They were quick to defend themselves. But words and actions do not always match up. Right afterwards, they did begin to desert Jesus, by falling asleep when he asked them to stay awake. What if, instead of trying to defend themselves, the disciples had just *listened* to Jesus? What if they had stayed quiet and let their actions do the talking and actually stayed awake when they were asked instead of just *saying* they would? Sometimes we talk too



much – as a way of defending ourselves or trying to convince ourselves and others that everything is going to be okay. Practicing silence as a discipline can help us be more in tune with ourselves and with God, so that we don't feel so pressured to always say the right thing. We can learn to be comfortable with silence in hard situations when there are no easy answers or right things to say.

**YOU:** While Jesus' disciples deserted him, we do not go into our time of silence alone. Silence is not the absence of God's presence; instead it gives us the opportunity to tune into ourselves and to what God is saying to us. Get your congregation thinking about how silence features in their lives. Offer some ideas for practicing the spiritual discipline of silence (e.g., start with five minutes a day of intentional silence, build up to more if you want, practice spending a few minutes in silence after reading scripture or praying to listen for God, try turning off the radio/phone/podcast in the car, try a meditation app, etc.). At the beginning of this Holy Week, how can you create space and silence for God in your daily life?

**WE:** How does your church community do with silence? What might God be saying to your congregation if you would practice intentional quiet listening? Consider asking small group leaders to build two minutes of silence into their small group routines or those who plan worship to build it into the worship service. If this is new to your congregation, perhaps after engaging in this practice, you could try a silent prayer service in 6-12 months. The congregation might be surprised at how the feel of worship changes when it is intentionally free of chit-chat.



## Easter Sunday Preaching Resources: Gratitude

**Scripture Passage:** Luke 24:1-12 (and Luke 24:52-53)

**Focus Statement:** Christ is risen! God's grace calls us to lives of gratitude.

**ME:** What are you grateful for? Make a list of what you're grateful for. What tops your list? Is it just material items or is it something more permanent? Even if it is a material item, think about why you are grateful for it. What would your life be like without it? What would you do to protect it/care for it?

Alternatively, tell a story about receiving an amazing gift that you were grateful for – this could be a Christmas or birthday gift, an experience, a gift of time or care from someone. Describe what your feelings were when you received it (e.g. surprise, wonder, excitement, feeling special - like the gift giver put in time and effort so the gift would be perfect for *you*). Describe the gratitude you felt toward the gift giver. Was it immediate and natural? How did you show or express your gratitude?

**WE:** We all know what gratitude feels like in response to a gift, but we may not realize that an “attitude of gratitude” is something we can cultivate in our lives. Practicing gratitude has become increasingly popular in secular culture. You can find gratitude lists, journals and meditations pretty much anywhere. Research even shows that gratitude makes people happier (e.g. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>). If we look deeper into the meaning of the word “gratitude,” we will learn that it comes from the Latin word for grace, graciousness and gratefulness. Gratitude comes out of the recognition that what we receive is not something we've earned or deserve – it is pure gift – grace (think about the difference in feeling when you receive your paycheck compared with receiving a gift). Easter is the primary event of God's grace to humanity. As we celebrate Easter, we can learn to live in response to grace through the practice of gratitude. The other spiritual disciplines we have looked at during Lent prepare us to be attentive to and aware of the moments and gifts of grace that God gives us every day.

**GOD:** To put Easter in the context of our Lenten series on spiritual disciplines, you might consider: why were the women at Jesus' tomb there in the first place? To anoint Jesus' body with the spices they had prepared. Why on this day and not sooner? Because they rested on the Sabbath? What would have happened if they had gone with the spices sooner, or not at all? We don't know for sure. But the point here is that the women lived life in a spiritual rhythm, their days and weeks and habits formed by the practices of their faith. It is not that they made resurrection happen through these things, but their spiritual disciplines put them in the right place at the right time to discover *and recognize* that the miracle of resurrection had taken place. Their spiritual disciplines, rather than fear or sadness, shaped their responses to the event of Jesus' death. Regardless of how they felt, the women were disciplined enough to do what needed to be done. That led them to the right place, at the right time.



Resurrection takes the women, and later Peter and others, by surprise. While the women go to the tomb to attend to the dead body of Jesus, God surprises them with the exact opposite – resurrection! Life! The only way they can respond is in surprise, wonder and awe. In Jesus, God has taken on the weight of sin and death on the cross and defeated it so that we, like Jesus, might live. This is a tremendous and surprising gift!

Notice that the apostles did not believe the women at first. Peter immediately runs to the tomb, eager to see what the women are talking about. When he does, he too becomes amazed. Next, Luke tells us about the two disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus. It takes some time for them to recognize the risen Jesus for who he is. Even though they, too, tell the rest of the apostles about Jesus' resurrection, the latter are still "startled and terrified" when Jesus shows up in person. Of course, anyone would be terrified if a dead person appeared to them alive! Jesus appears at different times and in different ways to different people. Jesus and the grace offered through him are always unexpected – grace breaks into our lives as a gratuitous gift.

Once the disciples get over the initial shock of Jesus' resurrection, and come to understand it as the gift of repentance (metanoia – change of mind/heart) and forgiveness of sins that it is, they respond in gratitude, not just for a moment but as a new way of life. Luke 24:52-53 tells us, "they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God." Gratitude becomes not just something we express, but part of who we are. Our disciplines bring us to a place where we trust that God will do something, and we are grateful to be a part of it.

**YOU:** Gratitude is a natural response to receiving a gift. In our busy lives, however, we do not always recognize God's gifts to us. As we live lives shaped by spiritual disciplines, we can become more attentive and aware of God's movement in our lives. Jesus' resurrection is the greatest gift of all time – through it, God conquers sin and death and opens us up to new life in both big and small ways. This gift is offered to everyone, but it is also especially meant for each one of us in particular.

Intentionally practicing gratitude is not only the appropriate response to this gift, but it also helps us to become increasingly more attuned to the grace we live in each and every day. It helps us to see the moments of life in the midst of sorrow, grief, and death.

Some ways to practice gratitude include keeping a gratitude journal, listing a few things each day that you are thankful for, sending someone a thank you note or calling them to say thank you, and praying prayers of thanksgiving.

**WE:** As a people who are forgiven and reconciled to God through the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are called to live in a posture of gratitude. Gratitude is not guilt or indebtedness; it is not feeling like we owe God. It is the joyful response to the gift of Jesus, given for us. As a community, name some ways you express gratitude (e.g., celebrating the Lord's supper, generous giving back to God through offering, volunteering in mission and ministry, prayers of thanksgiving). Think about how you, as a community, can be more intentional about gratitude and how in doing so, you will participate more fully in heralding the Kin(g)dom of God.