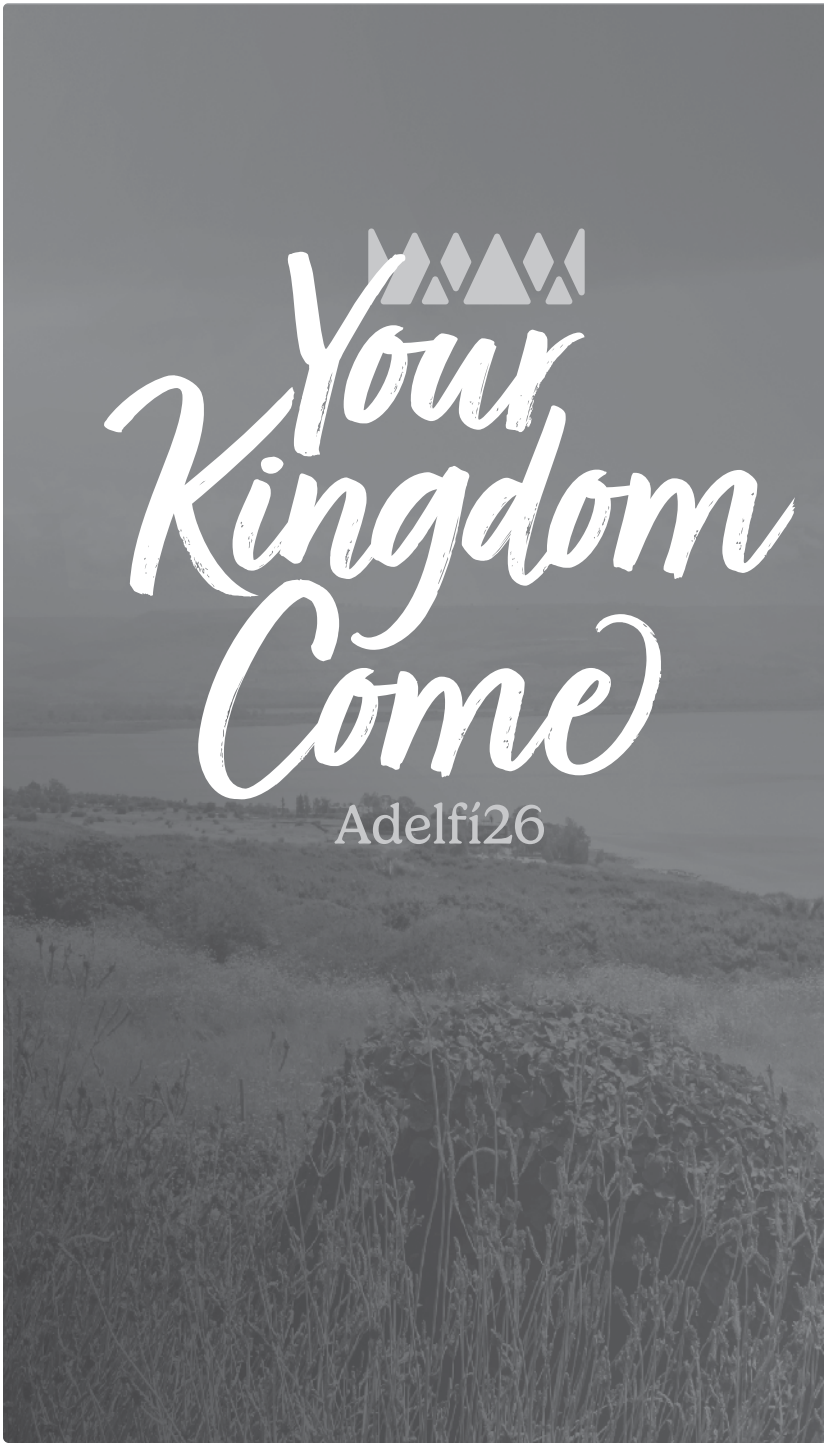

Your Kingdom Come
Adelfí26


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Welcome to



Lessons from the Sermon on the Mount

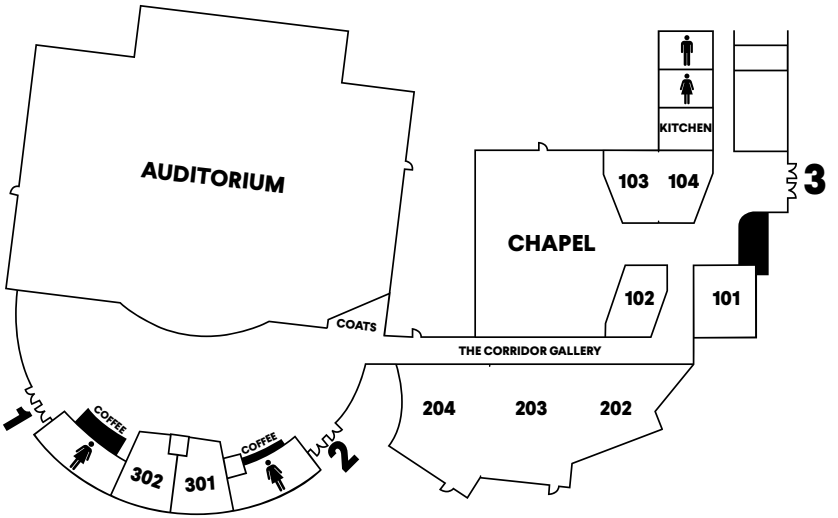
Thank you so much for joining us for the Adelfi conference. We've been praying and planning for this weekend for over a year, looking forward to all that God will do in and among us.

Adelfi is the Greek word for sister. We chose this name because we want this conference to be a reminder that we are not walking this journey of faith alone, but are surrounded by other women who can rejoice with us, worship with us, pray with us, cry with us, inspire us, and encourage us. So whether you are visiting or you call Riverview your home, we are so glad you are here.

Over these two days, we will study the Sermon on the Mount and closely examine what Jesus says about his kingdom of heaven and what its citizens are like. We invite you to step away from the busyness of life to study, worship, and pray together. We pray that this time will strengthen your faith, increase your curiosity, and refresh your soul – and hopefully you will walk away with a few more sisters by your side.

You can find more information about Adelfi at **adelficonference.com**. The sessions will be recorded and posted after the conference.

Holt Venue



Scan the QR code to visit the Adelfi Conference Website

Please note that a space for nursing mothers is available in room 302.

Schedule

Friday, November 6, 2026

6:00 p.m.	**Doors Open**
7:00 p.m.	Worship Testimony with *Jessica Brown*
8:00 p.m.	Mix-n-mingle

Saturday, November 7, 2026

8:00 a.m.	**Doors Open**
9:00 a.m.	Conference Begins **Session One:** True Kingdom *(Matthew 5:1-16) with Wendy Smith* **Session Two:** True Righteousness *(Matthew 5:17-48) with Alex McGraw*
10:45 a.m.	**Interactive Session** - *(choose one)* • Why and How to Study the Bible *with Erin Lodes in Chapel* • Scripture Memorization *with Karen Ehman in Auditorium* • Self-guided activities *in rooms 202-204*
11:30 a.m.	**Session Three:** True Religion (*Matthew 6:1-24) with Jennifer Rountree*
12:15 p.m.	Lunch Break
1:15 p.m.	**Session Four:** True Relationships *(Matthew 6:25-7:12) with Colleen Davenport* **Session Five:** True Response *(Matthew 7:13-29) Panel Discussion*
2:30 p.m.	Spoken Word and Guided Prayer *with Laura Allen*
3:00 p.m.	**Conference Closes**

All sessions are in the auditorium unless otherwise noted.

Speakers and Host

Alex McGraw



Alex is a Bible teacher, writer, and homeschooling mom of four. She loves helping women see that the Bible is one grand story woven together, revealing God's glory and goodness. She believes theology should cultivate delight, not just information, and is convinced that the more we understand God's Word, the more we delight in the God who gave it. She's been part of the Riverview family since 2014 and has loved serving through RivKids curriculum writing, marriage ministry, and now writing and teaching women's Bible studies. She and her husband — whom she's known for half her life and with whom she still communicates primarily through movie quotes — are raising four curious kids in an old farm home. She finds joy in iced coffee, books that make her think, lifting heavy weights, and deep conversations.

Colleen Davenport



Colleen has been an active member of Riverview since 2006, when she and her husband moved to East Lansing to restart Riv's college ministry with a group of campus missionaries from UofM. She is currently part of the Women's Ministry Team and co-authored the Women's Mentorship Curriculum. She has also taught at the Women's Bible Study and serves in RivKids at the REO Town Venue. She has a heart for teaching others how to read and understand the Bible in its own context and apply it to their lives.

Even though she's originally a Wolverine, Colleen also has a master's degree in Educational Technology from MSU. Before opening her photography business, Colleen wrote curriculum for RivKids, was a stay-at-home mom, and before having kids, was a high school social studies teacher.

Colleen is a homebody at heart, but she also loves being outside in nature and exploring trails and lakes with her husband, Dan, her four kids, and their dog (who is the sweetest squirrel murderer you'll ever meet). She loves spending time with friends, and she finds joy in creating photos that tell a story, especially photos that revolve around her family's everyday life. She is also the happy owner of a chunky rabbit named Brussel Sprout.

Erin Lodes



Erin Lodes is a homeschool mama of three kids and has been married for 21 years to her college sweetheart. She directs her local homeschool community, and loves helping her kids fall in love with and learn more about God's beautiful creation. She enjoys reading, learning, and teaching others — on a variety of topics — but especially loves inspiring people to read and fall in love with God's Word.

Erin has been actively involved in Riverview since moving to Michigan in 2015. She has led life groups, greeted people at the door, taught Women's Bible Study, and was a part of the cohort that launched Riv's current women's ministries. Currently, she serves at the Westside Venue in RivKids and as a host, and leads a multi-generational Community Group in Delta Township which has members representing every decade from 0 through 80!

In her former life, Erin was a middle and high school band director, an instructional coach, a middle school cross country coach, and an educational technology specialist. Her daily go-tos are running, lifting, and studying and memorizing scripture. She loves hiking and exploring beautiful places with her family, reading, paddle boarding, and mountain biking with her husband and kids.

Jennifer Rountree



Jennifer (Jenn) Rountree has a passion for making people feel welcome and sharing the love of Jesus. She'll be the first to tell you that's because of the incredible examples of love and prayers of her grandparents, whose faith still influences her every day. Jenn has been part of the Riv family since 2009, when she first attended on a date with her now-husband, Josh, shortly after moving to Michigan from California. She quickly found opportunities to serve and connect and has been involved ever since. Jenn currently serves on Riv's Connect Team, in RivKids, and on the Women's Ministry Team. At past women's conferences, she happily made sure there was plenty of coffee and treats to keep everyone energized!

Outside of church, Jenn has dedicated nearly 30 years to supporting children, families, and educators through her work in education. When she's not serving at Riv or at work, she enjoys walking her sweet rescue dog, Gnocchi (yes, like the pasta), cheering on her son, Greyson, from the soccer sidelines, and cooking cherished family recipes passed down from both of her grandmothers. Jenn's greatest desire is to encourage others to know Jesus more deeply and to experience His love, grace, and presence in every season of life.

Karen Ehman



Karen Ehman is a New York Times bestselling author, speaker, and Bible teacher who has written 22 books and Bible studies, including *Keep It Shut: What to Say, How to Say It, and When to Say Nothing at All* and the 2020 ECPA devotional book of the year *Settle My Soul*. She is a graduate of Spring Arbor University and serves as President-Elect of their Alumni Board of Directors. She has been featured on TODAY Parenting, Redbook.com, Crosswalk.com, Christianity.com, and YouVersion.com and she also writes a monthly column for HomeLife Magazine.

Karen (who also goes by the nickname Kit) is married to her college sweetheart, Todd, and together they teach the Foundations for Faith Bible study at Riverview. She is the mother of five children: three biological and two in-laws by marriage — although she forgets which ones are which. Her greatest joys in life are her four-year-old grandson, Jasper Ridge, and his baby sister, Magnolia Rose. She enjoys sharing the gospel both online and in front of an audience, but most importantly as she feeds the friends, neighbors, and even strangers who gather around her mid-century dining table for a taste of Miss Kit's cooking. You can connect with her at **karenehman.com**.

Laura Allen (Host)



If asked about her perfect day, Laura Allen would say it begins with receiving the truth that God loves her. That way, when the day inevitably turns out not-so-perfect, she might remember — by the grace of God — that she is loved anyway.

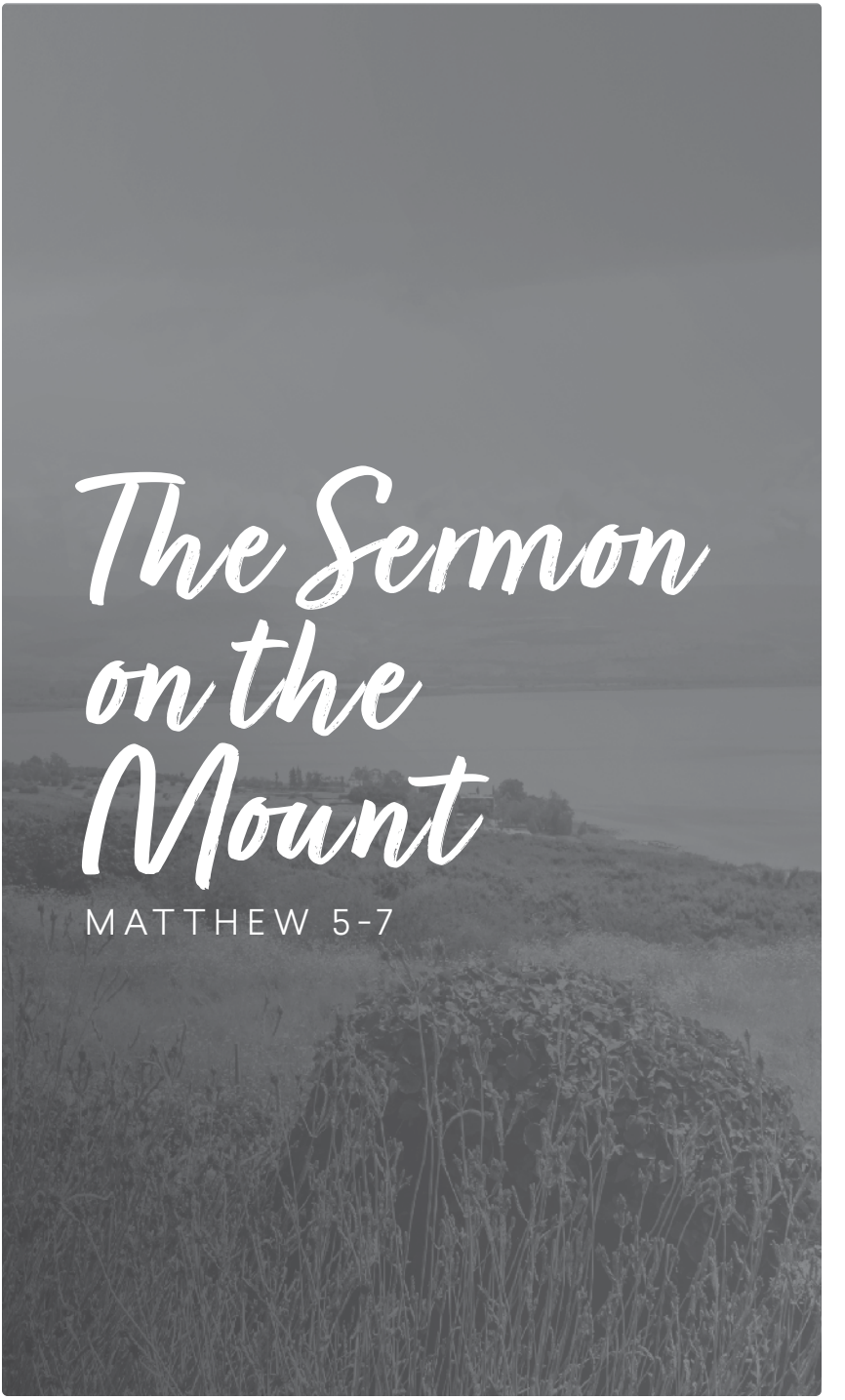
Of course, most mornings don't begin perfectly. (She's not a morning person, but interestingly, she's not a night person either — how does that work?) Laura often scrambles to her job as a middle school teacher in Haslett, but God is kind enough to remind her of his love anyway, usually through a cup of coffee with vanilla creamer and the laugh of an 8th grader. As her introverted self returns home to East Lansing, God shows his love again by quiet afternoons filled with walks downtown, mystery books, or cuddling with her pets. (Ah, perhaps if there's such a thing as an afternoon person, that's what she is.) But every day, even the worst ones, she sees God's love in her husband Jordan, aka her best friend, high school sweetheart, and pastor.

At Riv, Laura serves on the Women's Leadership Team and at the MSU venue alongside her friends-turned-family. If you could read her mind, you'd often catch her thinking, "I can't believe I get to do ministry with such beautiful people" — yet another reminder of his faithful love.

Wendy Smith



Wendy Smith serves as Riverview's Women's and Marriage Ministry Director. She's passionate about creating spaces where people feel known, supported, and equipped to grow in their faith and relationships. Wendy first met Jesus at five years old through Awana and has been growing in her identity in Christ ever since — something she treasures deeply in passages like Ephesians 1. Outside of ministry, Wendy loves spending time with family and friends, reading great stories (like *East of Eden, Anna Karenina, and Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*), and making things look pretty by organizing them. She has a soft spot for porches, coffee (or a Mt Dew Code Red), and petting all the animals. Just don't challenge her to outsmart an inanimate object — she will win.


The Sermon on the Mount
MATTHEW 5-7

5 When he saw the crowds, he
went up on the mountain, and
after he sat down, his disciples came
to him. 2 Then he began to teach them,
saying:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.
4 Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
5 Blessed are the humble,
for they will inherit the earth.
6 Blessed are those who hunger and
thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
7 Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
8 Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
9 Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.
10 Blessed are those who are
persecuted because of righteousness,
for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

11 "You are blessed when they insult
you and persecute you and falsely say
every kind of evil against you because
of me. 12 Be glad and rejoice, because
your reward is great in heaven. For
that is how they persecuted the
prophets who were before you.

13 "You are the salt of the earth. But if
the salt should lose its taste, how can
it be made salty? It's no longer good
for anything but to be thrown out and
trampled under people's feet.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city
situated on a hill cannot be hidden.
15 No one lights a lamp and puts
it under a basket, but rather on a
lampstand, and it gives light for all
who are in the house. 16 In the same
way, let your light shine before others,
so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father in
heaven.

17 "Don't think that I came to abolish
the Law or the Prophets. I did not come
to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell
you, until heaven and earth pass away,
not the smallest letter or one stroke
of a letter will pass away from the law
until all things are accomplished.
19 Therefore, whoever breaks one
of the least of these commands and
teaches others to do the same will be
called least in the kingdom of heaven.
But whoever does and teaches these
commands will be called great in the
kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you,
unless your righteousness surpasses
that of the scribes and Pharisees, you
will never get into the kingdom of
heaven.

21 "You have heard that it was said to
our ancestors, Do not murder, and
whoever murders will be subject to
judgment. 22 But I tell you, everyone
who is angry with his brother or sister
will be subject to judgment. Whoever
insults his brother or sister will be
subject to the court. Whoever says,

'You fool!' will be subject to hellfire.
23 So if you are offering your gift on the
altar, and there you remember that
your brother or sister has something
against you, 24 leave your gift there
in front of the altar. First go and be
reconciled with your brother or sister,
and then come and offer your gift.
25 Reach a settlement quickly with
your adversary while you're on the
way with him to the court, or your
adversary will hand you over to the
judge, and the judge to the officer, and
you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly
I tell you, you will never get out of there
until you have paid the last penny.

27 "You have heard that it was said,
Do not commit adultery. 28 But I tell
you, everyone who looks at a woman
lustfully has already committed
adultery with her in his heart. 29 If
your right eye causes you to sin, gouge
it out and throw it away. For it is better
that you lose one of the parts of your
body than for your whole body to be
thrown into hell. 30 And if your right
hand causes you to sin, cut it off and
throw it away. For it is better that you
lose one of the parts of your body than
for your whole body to go into hell.

31 "It was also said, Whoever divorces
his wife must give her a written notice
of divorce. 32 But I tell you, everyone
who divorces his wife, except in a
case of sexual immorality, causes
her to commit adultery. And whoever
marries a divorced woman commits
adultery.

33 "Again, you have heard that it was
said to our ancestors, You must not
break your oath, but you must keep
your oaths to the Lord. 34 But I tell
you, don't take an oath at all: either
by heaven, because it is God's throne;
35 or by the earth, because it is his
footstool; or by Jerusalem, because
it is the city of the great King. 36 Do
not swear by your head, because you
cannot make a single hair white or
black. 37 But let your 'yes' mean 'yes,'
and your 'no' mean 'no.' Anything
more than this is from the evil one.

38 "You have heard that it was said, An
eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.
39 But I tell you, don't resist an evildoer.
On the contrary, if anyone slaps you on
your right cheek, turn the other to him
also. 40 As for the one who wants to sue
you and take away your shirt, let him
have your coat as well. 41 And if anyone
forces you to go one mile, go with him
two. 42 Give to the one who asks you,
and don't turn away from the one who
wants to borrow from you.

43 "You have heard that it was said,
Love your neighbor and hate your
enemy. 44 But I tell you, love your
enemies and pray for those who
persecute you, 45 so that you may be
children of your Father in heaven. For
he causes his sun to rise on the evil

and the good, and sends rain on the
righteous and the unrighteous. 46 For
if you love those who love you, what
reward will you have? Don't even the
tax collectors do the same? 47 And
if you greet only your brothers and
sisters, what are you doing out of the
ordinary? Don't even the Gentiles do
the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as
your heavenly Father is perfect.

6 "Be careful not to practice your
righteousness in front of others
to be seen by them. Otherwise, you
have no reward with your Father
in heaven. 2 So whenever you give
to the poor, don't sound a trumpet
before you, as the hypocrites do in the
synagogues and on the streets, to be
applauded by people. Truly I tell you,
they have their reward. 3 But when you
give to the poor, don't let your left hand
know what your right hand is doing,
4 so that your giving may be in secret.
And your Father who sees in secret
will reward you.

5 "Whenever you pray, you must not be
like the hypocrites, because they love
to pray standing in the synagogues
and on the street corners to be seen
by people. Truly I tell you, they have
their reward. 6 But when you pray,
go into your private room, shut your
door, and pray to your Father who is
in secret. And your Father who sees
in secret will reward you. 7 When you
pray, don't babble like the Gentiles,
since they imagine they'll be heard for
their many words. 8 Don't be like them,
because your Father knows the things
you need before you ask him.

9 "Therefore, you should pray like this:

Our Father in heaven,
your name be honored as holy.
10 Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us today our daily bread.
12 And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 And do not bring us into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

14 "For if you forgive others their
offenses, your heavenly Father will
forgive you as well. 15 But if you don't
forgive others, your Father will not
forgive your offenses.

16 "Whenever you fast, don't be gloomy
like the hypocrites. For they disfigure
their faces so that their fasting is
obvious to people. Truly I tell you, they
have their reward. 17 But when you
fast, put oil on your head and wash
your face, 18 so that your fasting isn't
obvious to others but to your Father
who is in secret. And your Father who
sees in secret will reward you.

19 "Don't store up for yourselves
treasures on earth, where moth
and rust destroy and where thieves

break in and steal. 20 But store up for
yourselves treasures in heaven, where
neither moth nor rust destroys, and
where thieves don't break in and steal.
21 For where your treasure is, there
your heart will be also. 22 "The eye
is the lamp of the body. If your eye is
healthy, your whole body will be full
of light. 23 But if your eye is bad, your
whole body will be full of darkness. So
if the light within you is darkness, how
deep is that darkness!

24 "No one can serve two masters,
since either he will hate one and love
the other, or he will be devoted to one
and despise the other. You cannot
serve both God and money.
25 "Therefore I tell you: Don't worry
about your life, what you will eat or
what you will drink; or about your
body, what you will wear. Isn't life
more than food and the body more
than clothing? 26 Consider the birds
of the sky: They don't sow or reap or
gather into barns, yet your heavenly
Father feeds them. Aren't you worth
more than they? 27 Can any of you
add one moment to his life span by
worrying? 28 And why do you worry
about clothes? Observe how the
wildflowers of the field grow: They
don't labor or spin thread. 29 Yet I
tell you that not even Solomon in all
his splendor was adorned like one
of these. 30 If that's how God clothes
the grass of the field, which is here
today and thrown into the furnace
tomorrow, won't he do much more
for you—you of little faith? 31 So don't
worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or
'What will we drink?' or 'What will we
wear?' 32 For the Gentiles eagerly seek
all these things, and your heavenly
Father knows that you need them.
33 But seek first the kingdom of
God and his righteousness, and all
these things will be provided for
you. 34 Therefore don't worry about
tomorrow, because tomorrow will
worry about itself. Each day has
enough trouble of its own.

7 "Do not judge, so that you won't
be judged. 2 For you will be
judged by the same standard with
which you judge others, and you will
be measured by the same measure
you use. 3 Why do you look at the
splinter in your brother's eye but
don't notice the beam of wood in your
own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your
brother, 'Let me take the splinter out
of your eye,' and look, there's a beam
of wood in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite!
First take the beam of wood out of your
eye, and then you will see clearly to
take the splinter out of your brother's
eye. 6 Don't give what is holy to dogs
or toss your pearls before pigs, or they
will trample them under their feet,
turn, and tear you to pieces.

7 "Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek,
and you will find. Knock, and the door
will be opened to you. 8 For everyone

who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.
9 Who among you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?
10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him. 12 Therefore, whatever you want others to do for you, do also the same for them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

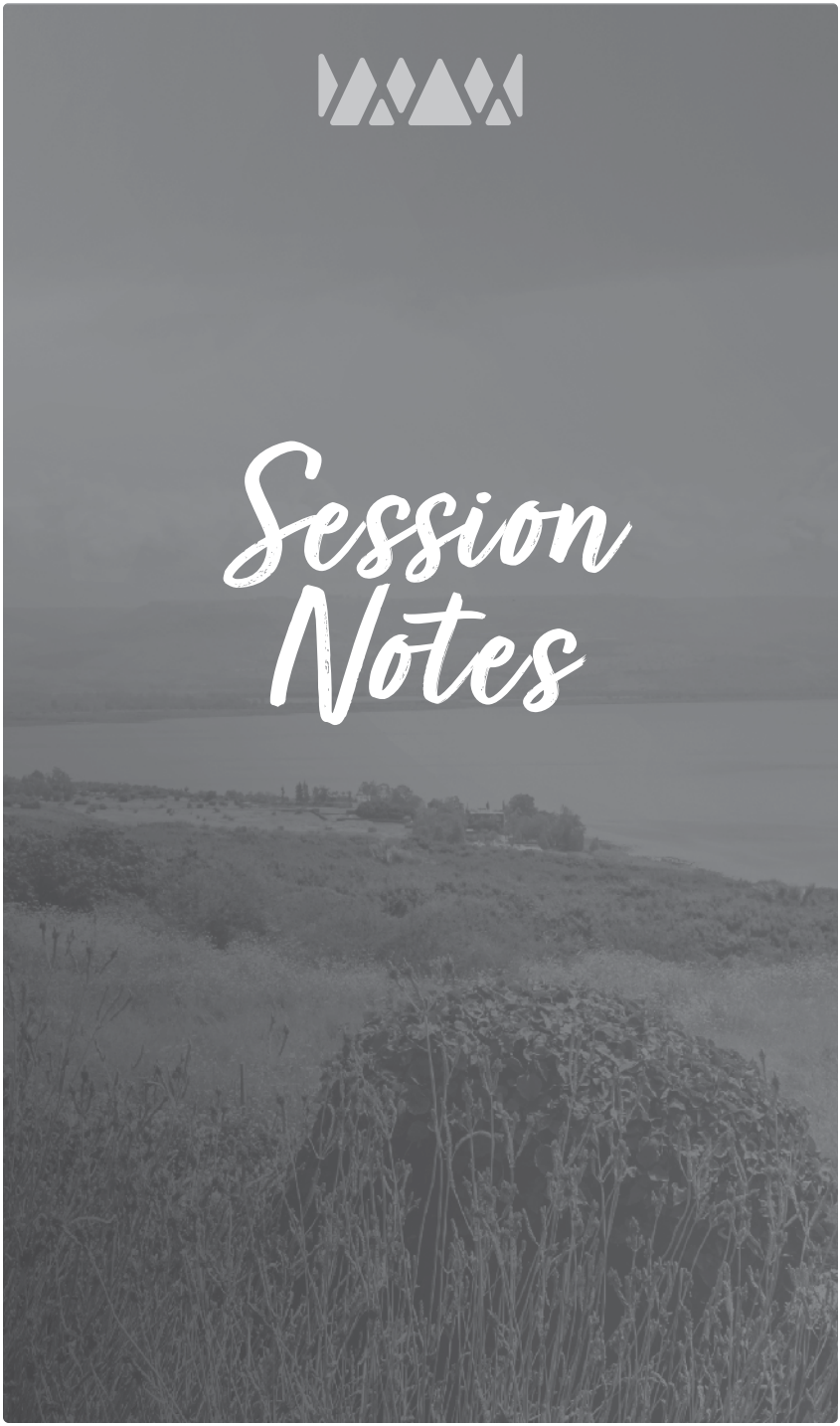
13 "Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it. 14 How narrow is the gate and difficult the road that leads to life, and few find it.

15 "Be on your guard against false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves. 16 You'll recognize them by their fruit. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes or figs from thistles?
17 In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. 18 A good tree can't produce bad fruit; neither can a bad tree produce good fruit. 19 Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 So you'll recognize them by their fruit.

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?'
23 Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!'

24 "Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 The rain fell, the rivers rose, and the winds blew and pounded that house. Yet it didn't collapse, because its foundation was on the rock. 26 But everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn't act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. It collapsed with a great crash."

28 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, 29 because he was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes.


Session
Notes

SESSION ONE:

True Kingdom

Matthew 5:1-16 *with Wendy Smith*

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What impacted you the most from this session regarding Jesus as King?

2. How has Jesus challenged your idea of what it means to be blessed?

3. Is there a specific situation or place where God is asking you to be salt or light? What might be holding you back?

SESSION TWO:

True Righteousness

Matthew 5:17-48 *with Alex McGraw*

NOTES

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What part of today's teaching helped you see God's Law or his character in a new way?

2. Where is Jesus inviting you to live more fully under his reign?

3. What is one step of obedience you want to take this week in response?

SESSION THREE:

True Religion

Matthew 6:1-24 *with Jennifer Rountree*

NOTES

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. As you think about Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:1–24, what is one truth you want to remember and one way you can put it into practice this week?

2. In Jesus' day, what did it mean to be a hypocrite? (The Greek word hypokritēs referred to an actor or stage performer.) How does that meaning deepen your understanding of Jesus' warning? In what ways is our modern understanding of "hypocrite" similar or different?

3. How is your heart posture toward giving, praying, and fasting? Which of these comes most naturally to you, and which feels more challenging? As you respond to Jesus' teaching, where might he be inviting you to align your motivations more closely with his heart?

SESSION FOUR:

True Relationships

Matthew 6:25-7:12 *with Colleen Davenport*

NOTES

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. How do you plan to remember that God already knows what you need?

2. What specific things or relationships do you find yourself seeking and worrying about instead of seeking God's kingdom?

3. How do you want to respond to God as a result of knowing that he cares so deeply for you?

SESSION FIVE:

True Response

Matthew 7:13-29 *Panel Discussion*

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What part of the discussion about our response to Jesus do you want to remember as you head into your next week?

2. Jesus gives us three pictures of ways we can respond to the invitation of entering his kingdom: a narrow versus a wide gate, good versus bad fruit, and a rock versus the sand foundation. Where do you find yourself in each one? Is that where you want to be?

3. Jesus ends not only with a call to believe the right things, but to do them. Looking honestly at your own life, where might you be more like the person who hears without doing — and what's one concrete way you could "build on the rock" this week instead?

GUIDED PRAYER

The Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:9-13 *with Laura Allen*

9 "Therefore, you should pray like this:

Our Father in heaven,
your name be honored as holy.
10 Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us today our daily bread.
12 And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 And do not bring us into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.
but deliver us from the evil one.

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CONFERENCE

Reflection

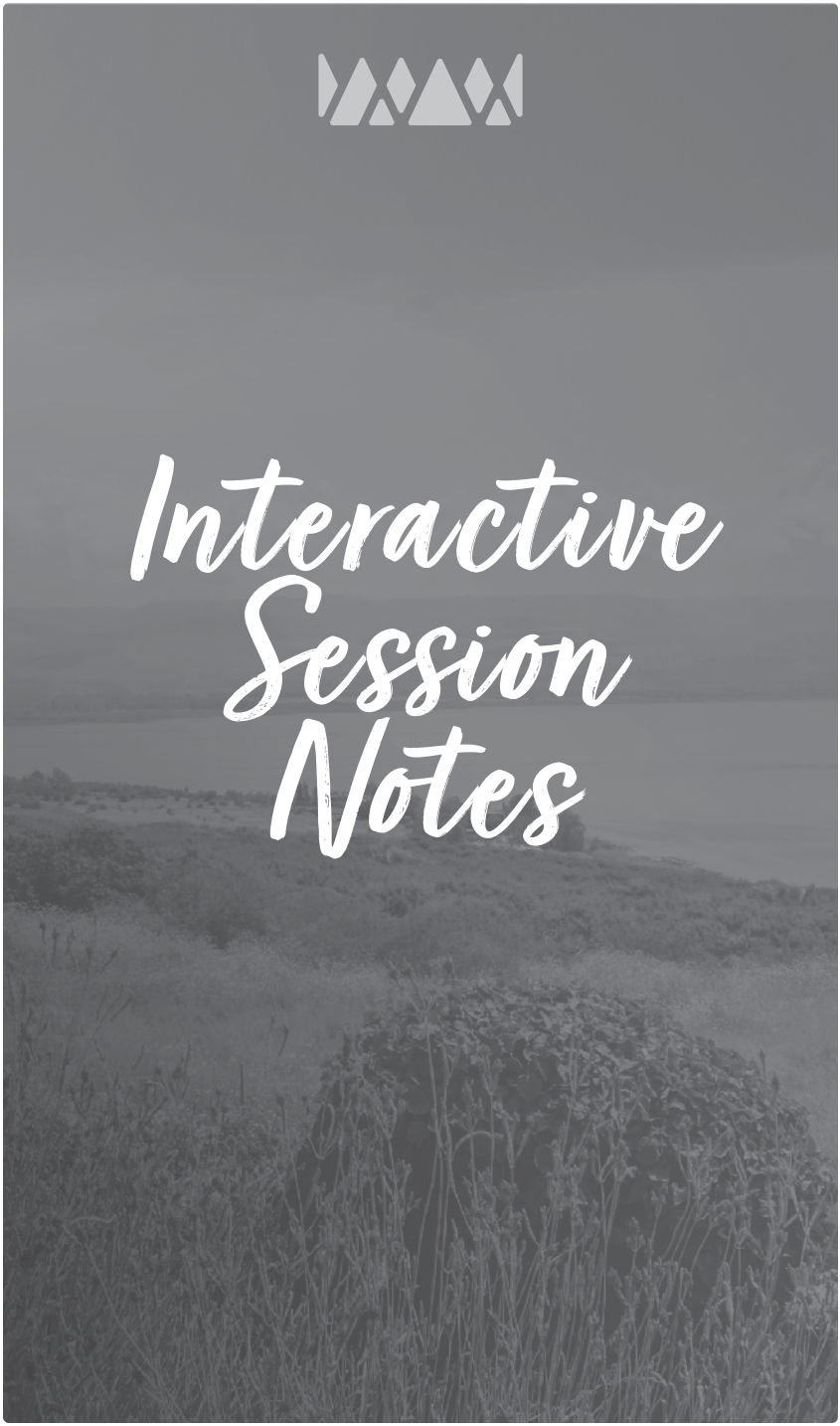
Matthew 5-7

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. As we have spent time studying the Sermon on the Mount, what have you learned about Jesus and his kingdom? How have you seen him or his kingdom with fresh eyes?

2. How has God met you in our time together? Has he convicted you of a specific sin in your life? Has he given you a desire to pursue a certain discipline?

3. As you process what we've studied, what are two to three specific actions you would like to implement in your life?


Interactive
Session
Notes

Why and How to Study the Bible

with Erin Lodes

Why is it important to study God's word for yourself, and how can you build this into a habit that you love? Pick up tips for building a lifelong habit of studying God's word and study a few verses from Matthew 7 together as we walk through a simple intro to the inductive Bible study method — a hands-on way to read Scripture that lets the text speak for itself through three core steps: **observation, interpretation, and application.**

NOTES

Scripture Memorization

with Karen Ehman

As a follower of Jesus, has it ever bothered you that you've not put a great deal of effort into Scripture memorization? Perhaps you know just a few of the most popular verses — the ones showcased on a coffee mug or t-shirt. Or maybe you know a ton of "sorta Scriptures", those where, if you hear the first part of the verse, you can "sort of" finish it, although you don't know it word-for-word, nor do you remember where it's located in the Bible.

In this hands-on workshop, you'll be equipped with doable ways to creatively and confidently weave the memorization of Scripture into your daily life. You'll also be able to practice some of the methods for yourself to help get you started on your way to becoming a woman who hides God's Word in her heart.

NOTES



Self-Guided Activities

These self-guided activities are designed to help you apply themes from the Sermon on the Mount to your own life. We hope they encourage and equip you long after the conference is over. If you choose, you can do one or two activities during the conference, but we also hope you will go home and use them during the coming weeks to continue reflecting on what you have learned.

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Praying the Beatitudes as Breath Prayers

with Laura Allen

You're scrambling. Pulled in every direction. Asked another question. Received another complaint. Your list grows longer but you have no time. You snap at someone you care about, then scold yourself for doing that. Your thoughts race.

You just can't do this.

Your friend looks at you and says, "Hey, just take a breath."

You know it's not that simple.

No, it's not that simple, but at the same time, deep breaths aren't just a cliché. They are a gift to the body in the way God designed it.

Your body and mind are interconnected. When you're stressed, your breathing quickens and your heart rate increases, which signals to your brain that something might be wrong. That means you experience your stress in both the body and the mind, making those racing thoughts difficult to beat.

Slow breathing actually interrupts this cycle. The long inhale and exhale of a deep breath — *in, two, three, four; out, two, three, four* — slows your heart rate, telling your brain that you can calm down because you're safe. And in safety, you can think clearly. You can finally meet your aim of that stressful moment: to collect your thoughts so that you can engage with your situation better.

The practice of breath prayer, then, is to layer Biblical truth onto your deep breaths. As your body finds its calm, the racing thoughts in your mind begin to quiet. Now you can choose to replace those thoughts with what you need, and there is nothing we need more than the Word of God.

Practically speaking, in a breath prayer, you choose a phrase for the inhale and a phrase for the exhale. You can choose any passage of Scripture that speaks to you, like the Beatitudes.

So, imagine you're feeling stressed and overwhelmed, but you choose to pause and say this breath prayer:

Inhale — *Blessed are the poor in spirit —*
and exhale — *for they will receive the Kingdom of God.*

Inhale again, exhale again, and say it again.

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for they will receive the Kingdom of God.

As you repeat the phrase, you let that truth minister to you, allowing it to speak to you. You remember that the poor in spirit are the ones who cannot do it all, the ones who cannot achieve perfection, the ones who cannot get it right every time. That's all of us. While the world looks at us and sees failure, demanding we earn our place again by proving our worth, the Beatitudes teach us something different. God, who is rich in mercy, looks upon

the ones who cannot do it all, and he chooses them to inherit his Kingdom. Not out of earning, not out of deserving, not out of proving our worth, but out of what Jesus did for us on the cross and our simple "yes" to receiving his life, death, and resurrection as our own.

This truth might not change the circumstances of your stress, but it does change who you are amidst it. You are among the poor in spirit, which means you've received the Kingdom of God. And in his Kingdom, you are loved, forgiven, and redeemed. Let that truth define your thoughts, feelings, and actions as you return to the moment you're in. Can you see how your situation might look different now?

To be clear, a breath prayer is not a secret shortcut to "fixing" your life, but it is a small practice to help you fix your eyes on God, the one you can trust with your life in all circumstances.

When you find yourself mourning a loss, inhale — *Blessed are those who mourn* — and exhale — *for they will be comforted.* Receive God's comfort for you.

When you're under the unbearable weight of temptation, inhale — *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness* — and exhale — *for they will be filled.* Receive the power of the Holy Spirit who will sustain you.

When you struggle to forgive people for the pain they caused, inhale — *Blessed are the merciful* — and exhale — *for they will be shown mercy.* Receive your forgiveness again from God so that you can offer forgiveness to others.

God, thank You for the gift of the body, not just the mind. Help me to choose one Beatitude this week to practice in breath prayer. Let it remind me to live not by the expectations of this world but by the grace that defines the Kingdom of God.

Living as Salt and Light

with Karen Ehman

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus mentions that believers are the salt of the earth and also the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). Have you ever thought about what these phrases mean, not only at face value, but what they meant to the audience that first heard Jesus utter these words so many years ago?

Take some time now to dive into what the Bible says about being salt and light in the world.

"You are the salt of the earth."

Read Matthew 5:13. Then, summarize the verse in your own words, using the space below.

In calling them the salt of the earth, Jesus was telling his followers not to be like salt that has lost its saltiness and then becomes no good. The original Greek word used in Matthew is the word "halas." This word did mean actual table salt — NaCl — the chemical compound for sodium chloride. However, it was also used figuratively to imply wisdom, prudence, and sound judgment.

First, consider what it meant to the people who heard Jesus' words in Matthew 5:13 when he said "you are the salt of the earth." In the ancient world, salt was very commonplace, but also very crucial. Here are some of the characteristics of salt then and also in our current culture:

- **Salt enhances flavor.** Salt is the number one flavor enhancer in the world. For thousands of years, it has been used to season food. But it hasn't just been used to make things salty. It's often sprinkled on sweet things to bring out the sweetness by its savory contrast. (Hello, dark chocolate with sea salt?!)
- **Salt preserves**. Salt can cure meat, preserving it and keeping it from spoiling. Untreated meat will last only a day or so without refrigeration. However, preserved with salt, it can last for many months.
- **Salt softens and purifies.** Salt pellets in a water softener serve two purposes: they soften the water by filtering out minerals that cause a gunky buildup. They also prohibit the growth of bacteria in the water, helping to purify it.

- **Salt melts hard ice.** If you live in the Midwest, no doubt you know that when there's lots of snow and ice, people pull out the salt to make things safe. We sprinkle it on sidewalks. Plow trucks spread it on the roads. Salt meeting hard ice will melt it away as it interacts with the frigid surface.
- **Salt can prevent infection in a wound.** Sure, putting salt on a wound stings, but it also could save an injured person's life if it prevented a runaway infection.

What spiritual significance did the properties of salt have to the original people who heard Jesus' words?

What spiritual significance might these properties of salt have for you?

Here are just a few ideas to consider, along with questions you might want to ponder as you seek to be that salt of the earth about which Jesus spoke:

Salt as a flavor enhancer. When it comes to your words, are you adding flavor? Are you bringing out sweetness in your conversation with others, especially online? And will you purposely add the flavor of Christ to your words, instead of adding bland or, worse yet, even bad ingredients? Take a few moments to write your thoughts about how our speech as Christians can add the flavor of Christ or detract from a conversation.

Salt preserves. Every day we see evidence of society decaying all around us. As Christians, we have to ask ourselves, "Do our words or actions add to the decay?" We are called to be the salt of the earth. Our words can help preserve the truth of God as we interact with others, whether in person or online.

Can you think of a time where either your words, or the words of another Christian, helped to prevent the decay that was happening in a conversation? For example, if the conversation of a group of friends was headed toward gossip, was someone brave enough to step up and point out that the discussion should take a different turn?

Salt melts hard ice. People can be cold, icy cold. When you interact with them, do your words help to melt the ice or do they add to the chilly climate? If you're given the cold shoulder, do you give it right back, or do you try to warm things up a bit by gently and respectfully engaging that person with kindhearted dialogue? When our words are carefully seasoned with salt and glazed with the love of God, they can melt even the iciest of hearts. Has there ever been a time when you've interacted with a person who was cold and you tried to break through the hard exterior? If so, what happened?

Look up the scriptures listed below. After reading each verse, in the space provided, write a sentence or two about how the verse correlates to being the salt of the earth.

Colossians 4:6

James 3:18

Titus 2:7-8

Keeping in mind that the original Greek word for salt can be used figuratively to imply wisdom, prudence, and sound judgment, see if you can "say it in a sentence." (OK, in a sentence or two!) If someone were to ask you what it means that Christians are supposed to be "the salt of the earth", how would you answer them?

"You are the light of the world."

Now read Matthew 5:14-15. Again, summarize the verses in your own words, using the space below.

Just after his declaration that believers in Christ are the salt of the earth, Jesus also labeled them the light of the world, concluding his thoughts with this directive, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) The original Greek word used in Matthew's gospel is the word *phós* which means to shine or make manifest, especially by the use of individual rays. The closest English word we have to it is luminousness, which can be natural or artificial, abstract or concrete, and can be taken either literally or figuratively.

So, why all the talk about light? Consider these properties of light.

- **Light is needed for growth.** Light sustains all life on the planet. It especially helps plants to grow. Plants get energy from light through a process called photosynthesis. Without light growth will cease and vegetation will die.
- **Light is on a daily cycle.** When at creation God created light and dark — and thus day and night — it set off a cycle that continues to this day. We can always count on light showing up without fail each morning.

- **Light can disinfect and heal.** The ultraviolet rays in the sun can destroy bacteria and even eliminate viruses. They do this by breaking down the genetic material in these organisms and keeping them from replicating. Because of this, sunlight is a powerful disinfectant. Throughout history, sunlight exposure has been praised for its healing properties. Today, through science, we know that getting sunlight helps to prevent diseases that are caused by not enough vitamin D in our bodies.
- **Light is needed to see clearly.** This is obvious, but not to be overlooked! In order to see clearly, we must have light. It can keep us from stumbling, causing ourselves and others harm.
- **Light heats things up.** When light is let into a room, it helps to bring the temperature up, adding warmth to the atmosphere.
- **Light shines brightest in the darkness.** And finally, light is in sharp contrast to darkness. Just think about how stars shine brightest when against the deep dark sky. Even the most minuscule slice of light entering a dark environment provides immediate illumination to that which is grim.

Now, it is your turn to unearth some application. Do any of these descriptions of the properties of light have a spiritual significance to them? What are some correlations you can draw between what light does physically to the darkness around it — or to the plants and objects and people it shines upon — and what shining the light of Christ can do in the lives of others? Try to come up with at least three correlations and then write them in the space provided here.

Look up the scriptures listed below. After reading each verse, in the space provided, write a sentence or two about how the verse is reflective of Christians being the light of the world.

1 Peter 2:9

Ephesians 5:8

Philippians 2:12-16

Keeping in mind that the original Greek word for light can be used to convey luminousness that is natural or artificial, abstract or concrete, and can be taken literally or figuratively, see if you can "say it in a sentence or two." If someone were to ask you what it means that Christians are supposed to be "the light of the world", how would you answer them?

Finally, reread the entire passage of Matthew 5:13-16 one more time. How does this section end? Why are we supposed to be salt and light in the world? Is it for our own reputation or for some greater good? Write your answer below.

In the coming days, may God empower you to let your light shine and your actions be salty (in a good way!) so that others may see your behavior, give glory to our Father in heaven, and — if they are not yet believers — be drawn to Jesus through the gospel message that they see in and hear from you.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You that You are the light of the world. May your light shine through me into this dark world. May I be a savory flavor to those around me so that they may be drawn closer to You. Help me to never lose my saltiness or let my light go out. Amen.

Loving Like Him: Loving Others Well

with Jackie Reilly

The Bible has a lot to say about love, as God himself is love. It's his very nature and being. 1 John 4:16 tells us that "God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him." We can't understand what love is or how to love others well if we don't understand who God is and how he loves us.

Thankfully, God himself came down to earth through Jesus to show us who he is and how much he loves us. We're even told by Jesus himself the two most important commands for us to follow, both involving love:

> 35 And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him:
> 36 "Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?"
> 37 He said to him, **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.** 38 This is the greatest and most important command.
> 39 The second is like it: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** 40 All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."
>
> **- Matthew 22:35-40**

Love God. Love people.

But as we've mentioned, we can't love God or love others if we don't understand God's love for us. Understanding this comes from dwelling in the Word of God, the Bible. We should all strive to be like the psalmist from Psalm 1, whose "delight is in the Lord's instruction," who "meditates on it day and night." The Bible is one long love story about God's faithfulness to his people. The Bible teaches us of God's promises for those who love him.

What are God's promises? Let's name just a few — perhaps copy or think about those that are most significant to you:

- He promises to never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5)
- He promises to be your refuge and fortress (Psalm 91:2)
- He promises to provide for your needs (Philippians 4:19)
- He promises peace that surpasses understanding (Philippians 4:7)
- He promises to comfort those who mourn (Matthew 5:4)
- He promises to answer prayers according to his will (1 John 5:14)
- He promises to grant wisdom to those who ask (James 1:5)
- He promises to guard your heart and mind (Philippians 4:7)
- He promises strength in times of weakness (Isaiah 40:29)
- He promises to guide you along the right path (Psalm 23:3)
- He promises to give rest to the weary (Matthew 11:28)
- He promises to be a light in darkness (Psalm 27:1)
- He promises to be a father to the fatherless (Psalm 68:5)

- He promises to be a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24)
- He promises victory over sin through Christ (1 Corinthians 15:57)
- He promises to forgive sins when confessed (1 John 1:9)
- And above all, He promises salvation through faith in Jesus (Ephesians 2:8-9)

The Bible is overflowing with God's promises. The Bible tells us we're God's children, and not only that, we are coheirs with Christ to God's Kingdom (Romans 8). Think about that. When we get to paradise, God will look at us and say, it's yours! This place belongs to you! God's love and faithfulness pour off the page. If you ever forget that you are loved, that you were knit together in your mother's womb, that you are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139), that God's steadfast love endures forever (Psalm 107), that absolutely nothing will ever be able to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8), dwell in the word of God and remind yourself of God's promises.

And most importantly, remember Jesus and what Jesus has done for you.

Read 1 John 4:7-11, John 3:16, Romans 5:8, and John 15:13.
Write down what Jesus has done for you.

Jesus physically laid down his life for us. That is the ultimate form of love. And the night before his death, Jesus gives his disciples a new command:

> **34** "I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. **35** By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
>
> **- John 13:34-35**

And right before Jesus tells this to his disciples, he had just washed their feet and told them this:

> **12** When Jesus had washed their feet and put on his outer clothing, he reclined again and said to them, "Do you know what I have done for you? **13** You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are speaking rightly, since that is what I am. **14** So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. **15** For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done for you.
>
> **- John 13:12-15**

Jesus demonstrates for us a sacrificial love, a servant's love.
A love that puts others' needs above his own.

What are some ways we can lay down our lives and serve the people in our life? How can we put other people's needs above our own?

We can't talk about loving others well without talking about 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Read this passage and write down a practical definition of what love does.

With this definition of love in mind, think through these questions, thinking about the people in your own life. What questions speak most to you?

- How can I be more patient with the people in my life?
- How can I be more kind to the people in my life?
- How can I celebrate and be happy for other people's accomplishments?
- How can I be more humble in my relationships?
- Do I give and serve out of love or because I'm expecting the praise of others?
- How can I be more selfless in my relationships?
- How can I show restraint in my relationships?
- Have I been holding the past against the people in my life? Am I keeping a record of other people's forgiven sins?
- Am I rejoicing in sin or accepting unrighteousness? If we are accepting of the things of this world that the Lord calls sinful, that really means we are rejoicing in evil and unrighteousness. In order to love others well, we have to share the truth, even when it's difficult. The most loving thing we can do for the people in our lives is to share with them the truth that sets us free.

- Do I protect the people in my life – spiritually, emotionally, physically?
- Do I believe the best of others and give them the benefit of the doubt?
- Do I have confidence in the future and hope for the best in my relationships?
- Do I love the people in my life, even if that love is not returned?

In the final analysis, we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). God's love and promises transform us to love him with our whole being and to love others as Christ loves us. The world should know we are Christ's disciples in this way: if we have love for one another (John 13:35).

God, thank You for loving me so graciously. Remind me of Your promises and help me to live each day in light of their truth. Help me to love others like You love me. Amen.

Loving Your Enemies

with Karen Ehman

It's easy to love those who are lovable. It's a breeze to be kind to people you like. But to display the same behavior toward the devilish or different is an altogether special assignment. However, Jesus not only taught it, but he modeled it.

Throughout the New Testament, we see Christ spending his time on earth with the not so wonderful people. Those whom society had rejected. In addition to loving people who were socially marginalized, Jesus also loved those who hated and despised him. Those who treated him terribly. He encouraged his followers to do the same without excuse. Jesus modeled upside down living and loving.

When we do good to those who would seek to harm us or show love to those who mistreat or talk badly about us, we are mirroring Jesus' behavior. He was merciful, just as God our Father is merciful. It is a countercultural idea to love the unloving. But it is God's plan for us. We get a glimpse of this in Luke chapter 6. Take time right now to read verses 27 through 36 to get a glimpse of the Lord's seemingly backwards teaching. Then answer the questions below.

What thoughts do you have after reading this passage in Luke? Is there any particular sentence that jumped out at you? If so, record it below and give your reason why.

Next, read the following passages one at a time. After each verse is read, ponder what you learn about how God expects us to treat others. Remember, these verses don't apply to just people we find it easy to love. They also apply to those people with whom we have a difficult relationship. Record your findings in the spaces provided.

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15

Philippians 2:1-4

John 13:34-35

Which of the preceding passages most challenged or convicted you? Draw a circle around it. Then, take a few moments to sketch out the reason you chose that Scripture in the section below.

If you were going to pick one verse to memorize from the passages you just read, which one would it be and why? Take time to not only think about this but also to write out the verse below in your own handwriting to further solidify it in your mind.

Since you chose to do this interactive session, perhaps God is prompting you to make a change when it comes to how you deal with a difficult person in your life. Ask him to bring to mind someone who is hard to love. Then, write a prayer in the space below — speaking to God with all honesty — about this person. Ask God to bless them and to soften your heart toward them and to be loving and kind when you interact with them in the future.

Some Tips on Loving the Hard to Love

- **Pray. Pray. And then pray some more.** Any encounter with a difficult-to-love person must start off with prayer. Ask God to soften their heart to receive his love through you. Also pray for yourself, asking God to show you the best approach for interacting with them.
- **Go slow.** Don't make the mistake of going too quickly. Many challenging people are cautious in their relationships. They won't want to be your friend right off the bat, so pace yourself.
- **Be curious.** Try not to write off those who are hard to love. Be curious. Investigate. There must be some reason why they behave the way they do. Often there is more to the story than meets the eye, so be prayerfully curious as you decide how best to handle this person.
- **Serve.** Sometimes the best strategy is to keep your mouth shut and your hands open. Look for ways to serve. Does your grouchy neighbor need their yard raked? Could that cantankerous church member benefit from you picking her up a latte this week? Look for ways to serve rather than speak. Sometimes the best sermons are lives lived well.
- **Expect nothing in return.** Zero. Zip. Nada. Don't expect the hard-to-love one will thank you or even notice what you do. The only way to go about loving the difficult is to expect nothing in return.
- **Glance at them but fix your gaze on Jesus.** It is Christ himself you are serving. When you look at others, choose to see him. By keeping this perspective in mind, it will help you to keep on keeping on.

Lastly, it is time to give wings to the prayer you wrote earlier, putting your desire to behave biblically into action. Think about something tangible you could do for this hard-to-love person. Could you send them a friendly text message? Could you compliment them on something they've recently done? Could you even buy them a little gift to extend an olive branch? At the very least, can you put them on your prayer list to begin praying for them? Below, list a few possible ideas you can come up with to show them love.

Now, choose just one gesture that you will do. Stop right now and put a note on your phone or your digital calendar to remind yourself to follow through on your intentions.

May God grant you success in following the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:43-45:

> **43** "You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.
> **44** But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

God, I confess that at times I struggle to love others — especially those who I have conflict with or who rub me the wrong way. Help me to love others the way that You love us, especially those that I find hard to love. Soften my heart toward them, so that I can reflect Your mercy and grace. Bring to mind tangible ways that I can show them love. Amen.

Practicing Spiritual Disciplines

with Wendy Smith

Spiritual disciplines. What thoughts come to mind when you hear those words? Work. Failure. Another thing to add to my to-do list. Sigh.

Spiritual disciplines are not meant to be tasks to complete to make God love you more. We can't do anything to make God love us more than he already does. These disciplines are practices and rhythms that help us grow in our understanding of, love for, and devotion to God. Let's face it, our world is so busy and there are so many things — even good things — fighting for our time, our thoughts, our money, that if we are not intentional our spiritual life can be easily neglected. Spiritual disciplines are here to help us prioritize our souls. There are many spiritual disciplines; however, the Sermon on the Mount mentions three — giving, prayer, and fasting. So that is where we will spend our time.

Giving

Spend some time looking up some or all of the following verses to see what God says about giving.

- 2 Corinthians 9:7
- Acts 20:35
- Luke 6:38
- Malachi 3:10
- 2 Corinthians 9:6
- 1 Timothy 6:17-19
- Matthew 6:1-4
- Mark 12:41-44
- Proverbs 3:27
- Proverbs 19:17
- Hebrews 13:16
- Luke 12:33-34
- Proverbs 28:27
- Proverbs 11:24-25
- James 1:17
- Luke 6:30
- John 3:16
- Deuteronomy 15:10

We see that we are to give back to God out of what he has given to us and we are to give to others. Giving is not only monetary but also includes our time, energy, and possessions. Take some time to reflect on your attitudes and actions regarding giving. Slowly work your way through the following questions. Be as honest as you can.

- What kind of a heart or motive does God desire when we give? Is he more concerned with what we give or our heart posture behind our giving?

- Which is harder for you, giving to God or giving to others? Why?

- Which is easy for you, giving of your money and possessions or giving of your time and energy? Why?

- What keeps you from giving generously — fear, laziness, lack of trust, selfishness? Or if you do give generously, what is your motive — to be praised by others, a tax write-off, compassion, love?

- What is a practical rhythm that you can implement this week to either begin changing your heart posture toward giving or to practically give in some way?

Prayer

Spend some time looking up some or all of the following verses to see what God says about prayer.

- Philippians 4:6
- 1 Thessalonians 5:17
- Hebrews 4:16
- John 15:7
- Romans 8:26
- Matthew 6:7
- James 5:16
- Luke 11:9
- Matthew 26:41
- Ephesians 6:18
- 1 Timothy 2:1-4
- Matthew 6:9-13
- Matthew 6:5-8
- Psalm 34:17
- Colossians 4:2
- 1 John 5:14-15

According to Tim Keller in his book *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, "Prayer is continuing a conversation that God has started through his Word and his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses our heart posture as we pray and gives us an example of how to pray. We've also included several other devotionals that include prayer in these self-guided activities (Creating a Prayer Journal, The Practice of Confession, and Praying Through the Lord's prayer).

Again, take some time to reflect on your attitudes and actions regarding prayer. Slowly work your way through these questions. Be as honest as you can.

- What has been your past experience with prayer?

- What keeps you from praying? (time not set aside, busyness, fear of not being eloquent enough, not knowing what to say?)

- What is a circumstance/person/or thing that you want to pray for? How can you use the Psalms, the Lord's Prayer, or other scriptures to help you pray?

- What has been your experience with praying with others? Are there people you could begin to pray with regularly? Or people with whom you can share your praises and requests?

- What is a practical rhythm that you can implement this week to either begin changing your heart posture toward prayer or to practically pray in some way?

Fasting
Spend some time looking up some or all of the following verses to see what God says about fasting.

- Joel 2:12
- Psalm 69:10
- Daniel 10:3
- Matthew 6:18
- Acts 14:23
- Luke 4:2
- Nehemiah 1:4
- Matthew 4:4
- Ezra 8:23
- Psalm 35:13
- Luke 18:10-14
- Luke 2:37
- Jonah 3:5-10
- Esther 4:15-16
- Acts 13:1-3
- Daniel 9:3
- Exodus 34:28
- Matthew 6:16
- Matthew 9:14-15

Fasting is going without food for a limited time in order to help/remind us to pray. Many people fast from lots of things — social media, sugar, caffeine, TV. Giving up all of these things for a time can be beneficial to us; however, in the Bible, we see that fasting includes giving up food, something we need to live, in order to help us bring all our needs to God. Fasting can be used as a way to mourn our sin or to seek guidance, protection, or provision. We can also set up rhythms of fasting in our lives, perhaps fasting for one day monthly or weekly. It can even be as simple as skipping one lunch each week to spend time in prayer.

Once again, take some time to reflect on your attitudes and actions regarding fasting. Slowly work your way through these questions.

- What did you learn from the verses you read about fasting?

- Why do you think fasting is connected with prayer?

When we fast, it is good to have a plan and purpose for the fast. Consider the following questions to help you decide where fasting may be beneficial for your life.

- Is there an area of your life that you are being challenged in or convicted about?
- Is there a sin that you have been struggling with for a long time? How could fasting with intentional times of prayer help you to overcome it?
- Is there a major decision coming in your life that you want to seek wisdom about?
- Is there someone who is going through a very difficult time that you want to petition God for?
- Are you carrying a burden that is weighing you down that you need to hand over to Jesus?

Once you decide your purpose for your fast, it is helpful to create a plan for your time.

- Make a list of verses to read through and pray.
- Journal your prayers.
- Read books or articles that address the purpose of your fast, perhaps it is a book of encouragement, or an article about overcoming the sin issues you are struggling with.
- Ask someone to join you!

Remember, these spiritual disciplines are tools to draw you to God. As we see in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is much more concerned with our heart posture as we do them than our performance. Don't feel the need to add all of these to your plate at once. Pick one, start slow, and keep steady and allow God to refresh and renew you through these practices.

God, thank You that I do not need to earn Your love. You lavish it freely upon me. But help me to know You more. Help me to make You a priority in my life and not just a relationship that gets squeezed into my schedule. May my time with You be intentional. Amen.

Praying Through The Lord's Prayer

with Laura Allen

It is not uncommon for a Christian to know they need to pray and want to pray, but sometimes we just don't know how to start.

Prayer is, in many ways, as simple as talking to someone, like talking to our loved ones. When it's hard for you to find words to pray, be encouraged that you don't need to overthink. Through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, we can now "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Still, prayer *is* different from talking to a loved one because the One you are talking to is unlike anyone else — and this is good news. We're not just talking to a friend, we are talking to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As the Psalmist says, "Our Lord is great, vast in power; his understanding is infinite" (Psalm 147:5). God can "do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us" (Ephesians 3:20).

Through prayer, we speak to the God who is both most loving and most powerful. When we're in need, he is the one who knows us best and understands the most. Don't deny yourself a true relationship with him by hesitating to pray to him or forgetting who you're praying to.

In Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus actually teaches us how to pray in what we call The Lord's Prayer. Praying Through The Lord's Prayer is a practice that can help orient our hearts and minds toward Biblical truth in any circumstance. Below, you'll find this prayer split into sections with prompts to consider. The questions aren't meant to be used all at once. For instance, you might only think about one prompt per section, or you might spend your time almost exclusively in one section. The goal of this resource is that you can return to it regularly and with consistency. Let Jesus' teaching on The Lord's Prayer forever impact the way you approach our God.

Our Father in heaven, your name be honored as holy.

- Give God his deserved honor and praise. What are the qualities of God?
- What encouragement can we receive that he is 'our' Father, making us a family? What type of Father is he?
- Thank God that he is holy — untainted by sin. Remind yourself that he is Lord over all.

Your kingdom come.

- Where are you longing for God's Kingdom right now? Tell him about the situations where you aren't seeing his ways be followed — the brokenness, the worries, the pain.
- Ask for qualities of his Kingdom to redefine those situations. What is needed? Humility, healing, reconciliation?
- Ask God how you can be a part of bringing his Kingdom near.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

- Surrender your plans to God's will. Declare your trust in his sovereignty.
- If you feel God is guiding you to do something that is hard or sacrificial, and you feel resistance to it, consider Jesus as he prays to the Father before going to the cross. Read Matthew 26:36-39, Mark 14:32-36, and Luke 22:39-42.

Give us today our daily bread.

- What are your deepest needs? Remember the Lord's saving grace and abounding love are already yours. He will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5).
- How is God currently providing for you? Even if life feels challenging right now, spend time telling God what you're thankful for.
- Ask God to give you what you need for today. Is it patience with others? Forgiveness for someone who hurt you? Commitment to the tasks you need to do?
- Declare your belief that God cares for you. Read Matthew 6:25-34.
- If you need more support to make it through today, reach out to a friend, a mentor, Wendy Smith, our Women's and Marriage Ministry Director, or a professional counselor.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

- Ask God to reveal your sins to you. Confess your sins and ask him for forgiveness. Thank him for his mercy, grace, and love.
- Do you need to ask for forgiveness from someone in your life? Is there someone you need to forgive? Pray for them by name.

And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

- Where in your life are you experiencing temptation? Ask God for a preventative action step. Write a verse of encouragement and place it where you'll see it. Tell a trusted friend and ask for prayer in that area of your life.
- Remember that James 1:14 says in temptation we are "enticed," often deceived into thinking it is not sinful. Pray for God to reveal the lies hiding your temptations.
- Praise God that "He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. In him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14).
- Remember that one day, the troubles of this world will fade away and we'll see God fully. Revelation 21:4 says, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away." In the end, God wins.

God, thank You for showing us how we can talk with You through prayer. Help me to draw near to You through The Lord's Prayer so that we are reminded of Your holiness, Your truth, and Your forgiveness. Amen.

Creating a Prayer Journal

with Wendy Smith

Sometimes prayer can feel like this elusive thing. We wonder if we are doing it right, if we are spending enough time praying, and we begin to compare ourselves to how we think others are praying. But at its most basic root, prayer is simply talking to God. It is a conversation with God, where we can pour out whatever we may be feeling, knowing that through this time, God will begin to slowly align our hearts, minds, and will with his. There is no "right" way to pray. You can pray breath prayers, liturgical prayers, long prayers, short prayers, prayers from Scripture, or your own crafted prayers. You can pray silently, out loud, or journal your prayers. We've seen in the Sermon on the Mount that we are encouraged to have private times of prayer and we don't have to worry about finding the right words because God knows what we need even before we ask. We also are given an example of how to pray in Matthew 6:9-13.

A prayer journal can help you organize your prayers, remember them, and reflect back on how God has answered your pleas. Remember, journaling is not meant to be legalistic, but a help to create a rhythm of prayer in your life. It helps us create a structure, but we are not meant to be stifled by the structure. Give yourself permission to change or alter things as you go.

So, let's build a prayer journal together.

First, grab a notebook. It could be a brand new, beautiful journal or it could be one that you found on clearance in the school supply aisle.

Second, decide how you want to use the notebook. Here are a few ideas:

- Divide the notebook into days of the week. Assign each day of the week a different topic to pray about. For example:
  - Sunday: church family and leadership
  - Monday: family members
  - Tuesday: friends
  - Wednesday: the world and governments
  - Thursday: unbelievers
  - Friday: finances
  - Saturday: gratitude

Or you could just divide your notebook into the sections and leave off the days. Then, each day as you pray, you can add requests and praises to the lists you have created. This works really well if you know that a certain day of the week is always extra busy, and you know you won't be able to have time to journal that day.

- If your notebook has enough pages, you can write a date on each page, for example, November 7th. Then you can divide the page into 3 to 5 sections. Each section will be for the same date but for a different year (2026, 2027, 2028). Then each year as you journal your new thoughts and requests, you can read what you were praying that same day in previous years.

- You can write out a simple prompt card that you place in your notebook and use every day. A simple prompt could be
  - Praise and Adoration of God
  - Confession of Sin
  - Urgent Requests
  - Thanksgiving and Gratitude
  - Petitions for Yourself and Others
- You can pray a Psalm each day. You could read the Psalm and then re-write it as a prayer in your own words or even focus on one or two key verses and write a prayer of the verses.
- You can pray any scripture from the passage that you read that day or have been meditating on.
- You can pray through the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, expanding on any part, or any one of Paul's prayers found in his letters such as Romans 11:33-36, 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, Ephesians 1:15-19, 3:14-21, Philippians 1:3-11 or Colossians 1:3-13.

No matter how you decide to set up your journal, remember that you are just talking to God while trying to create a rhythm of prayer in your life. You can start small, both in time and length, and slowly grow. And remember that these don't have to be beautiful. You can create a beautiful, decorated page or you can allow your handwriting to reflect your mood, writing fast and furious when you are hurting deeply. Don't forget you can be raw and honest in your prayers. As Pastor Noel taught us, we can breathe out the hard yuckiness of life, and breathe in the truth of God's Word.

Lord, thank You for the gift of prayer. Thank You for hearing our cries and our shouts of praise. When I open this journal and begin to pray, align my heart and mind with Yours. May this also be a gift to me as a reminder of Your faithfulness and Your consistent goodness. Amen.

*Note: There will be limited supplies in rooms 202-204 for creating a prayer journal. Help yourself while supplies last.

Trading Worry for Trust

with Jennifer Rountree

It is easy for worry to creep into our lives. We all have struggles in this world and sometimes we get caught up in worrying and focusing on the "what ifs" more than "with God." We have a loving God who can overcome and provide for us.

When Jesus speaks in Matthew 6, he's talking to ordinary people living with real concerns. They weren't imagining their needs. They wondered where their next meal would come from, what they would wear, and how they would care for their families.

Yet Jesus says something that almost sounds impossible:

> "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life…"
>
> **- Matthew 6:25 (NIV)**

Notice he doesn't say, **"You'll never have problems."**
He says, **"You don't have to be ruled by them."**

Worry may knock on the door, but it doesn't have to become the permanent guest in our hearts.

Notice in verses 26 and 28 Jesus points to the birds and the flowers. He says, **"look."**

Birds don't have retirement accounts. They don't store groceries. They don't know what tomorrow holds.

Yet every morning they sing. Not because life is easy. But because the One who created them is faithful. Think about the last time you noticed birds outside.

Were they anxious? Or were they simply doing what they were created to do?

Now ask yourself: **Where have I been trying to control something that really belongs in God's hands?**

Pause.

Invite God into that answer.

Then Jesus changes the picture.

> "See how the flowers of the field grow…"
>
> **- Matthew 6:28 (NIV)**

Flowers don't compare themselves to the flower next to them. They don't strive. They don't compete. They simply receive what God provides. How often do we do the opposite?

We compare our families. Our homes. Our careers. Our social media feeds.

Comparison quietly whispers, "You're behind." "You're not enough." "You should have it all together by now."

But Jesus reminds us that our value isn't found in keeping up with everyone else. It is found in belonging to him.

Reflection:
Finish this sentence:

Lately I've been comparing myself to _____.

Now ask:

What would change if I believed that God has given me exactly what I need for this season?

Every time worry whispers, **"What if?"** Answer it with a truth about God. Look to the scripture to see the many attributes of God.

"What if things don't work out?" **- God is still faithful.** (Psalm 119:90)

"What if I don't know what to do?" **- God promises wisdom to those who ask.** (James 1:5)

"What if I'm alone?" **- God says he will never leave me nor forsake me.** (Hebrews 13:5)

"What if I can't handle this?" **- God's strength is made perfect in my weakness.** (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Every "what if" can become an opportunity to remember **who God is**.

Because the opposite of worry isn't pretending everything will be okay.

The opposite of worry is trusting that **God will be with us no matter what**.

Jesus ends this passage with these words:

> **33** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. **34** Therefore don't worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.
>
> **- Matthew 6:33-34**

Notice Jesus doesn't tell us to ignore tomorrow. He tells us where to focus today. Worry pulls us into an imagined future. Faith anchors us in God's presence today.

Father God,

Thank You for reminding us that You are a loving and faithful God who sees every need and cares for every detail of our lives. Help us to release our fears, our "what ifs," and the burdens we were never meant to carry into Your capable hands.

Teach us to seek You first each day. When anxiety begins to rise, remind us to look to the birds, the flowers, and most of all, to Your promises. Fill our hearts with the peace that comes from knowing You are with us, You are for us, and You will provide exactly what we need for each season.

May we choose faith over fear, trust over worry, and Your presence over our need for control. We surrender tomorrow to You and commit to walking faithfully with You today.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Practice of Confession

with Laura Allen

> [12] And forgive us our debts,
> as we also have forgiven our debtors.
> [13] And do not bring us into temptation,
> but deliver us from the evil one.
>
> **- Matthew 6:12-13**

Confession has been a common practice throughout church history, but if we're honest with ourselves, we often feel a deep resistance to confessing our sins.

Psalm 36:2 says, "For with his flattering opinion of himself, he does not discover and hate his iniquity." Notice the connection the Psalmist makes between flattery and iniquity: we use a better opinion of ourselves to shield us from seeing our sin. Maybe you don't think of yourself as a self-flattering person, but have you ever taken on a perspective that distances you from taking ownership for your sins?

- Well, I shouldn't have gotten angry with you, but it's only because you keep doing the thing I asked you not to.
- I know I shouldn't have used that tone, but at the same time, someone needed to say it.
- Sure, I shouldn't keep doing *this*, but it's not like I'm doing *that*.

Sometimes, the flattering opinion of yourself looks less like hyping yourself up and more like downplaying what you did wrong.

For many of us, distancing ourselves from our sins feels safer than confronting them. Confession, in our experience, stirs up fear and shame. We fear the punishment that comes with having done something wrong. We are ashamed that we keep being this person who does the wrong thing. In a desire to seemingly "protect" ourselves from that discomfort, we can minimize our confession or avoid it altogether.

But who taught us to be afraid? Is God really waiting for us to confess so that he can punish us or shame us? When we read God's Word, the view of confession is such a positive one:

- "If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." — 1 John 1:8-9
- "The one who conceals his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them will find mercy." — Proverbs 28:13
- "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect." — James 5:16

Confessing sins isn't about fear, shame, or punishment; it's about mercy, gratitude, and freedom. Our understanding of confession is backwards and based on lies. What masquerades as protection actually prevents us from the new life that God has for us.

Here's the reality: sin creates division. When I sin, I create distance between myself and God, others, or even within myself. To deny my sin is to deny that gap exists, and therefore, how could I possibly begin to close it? If I can't admit my wrong, how can I make it right? My relationships will remain strained, the pain will remain unhealed, and the community will remain broken. The conviction we feel during confession, though uncomfortable, is the pathway to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Don't we already know this from our salvation? Through naming our sinful nature, we recognized our need for Jesus as our Savior. And when we asked for his forgiveness, did he deal with us in wrath and punishment? No, our God did the exact opposite: he responded to our sins with endless mercy and saving grace. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1), not because we made ourselves sinless, but because the punishment for our sins has already been paid through Jesus' death on the cross. Now, through his resurrection and ascension, we belong to his Kingdom. We are not burdened by the shame and fear of our sins anymore; we are sustained by the love of the Father, the righteousness of the Son, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

True, we stumble our way through this life as sinners, and our sins may still feel scary to confront. But in those moments, remember "There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment" (1 John 4:18a). Do you get it? God has taken our punishment away, which means we are free to come confess and receive the forgiveness we need. We can face our sins head on, without fear and without shame, because we know we are safely held within the love of God. We can pursue righteousness in this life because our unrighteousness no longer means death; it just means I need Jesus, and the good news of the gospel is I'm already his.

Sister, why fear the confession of your sins when this very act brings you to the feet of your loving Savior?

If you're a follower of Jesus, this is your story, now and forever. If you're not, this story is yours to receive — all you need to do is ask. Romans 10:9 says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Wherever you've been or whatever you've done, our Father delights to welcome you home.

So let us not fall into the temptation of self-flattery, analyzing and rationalizing our sins away so that they aren't sins anymore. Don't let fear and shame prevent you from receiving the forgiveness and love of God. You never need to make yourself clean enough to stand before your Father; it is Jesus who washes your sins away, not you. So even when stumbling in your sins, approach the throne of God boldly as the daughter of the King, knowing that through the confession of your sins — even the sins you commit again and again — you will receive forgiveness, grace, and mercy again and again.

How do we begin this practice? Set a weekly reminder to commit 30 minutes to nothing but confession. Consider this outline for your time:

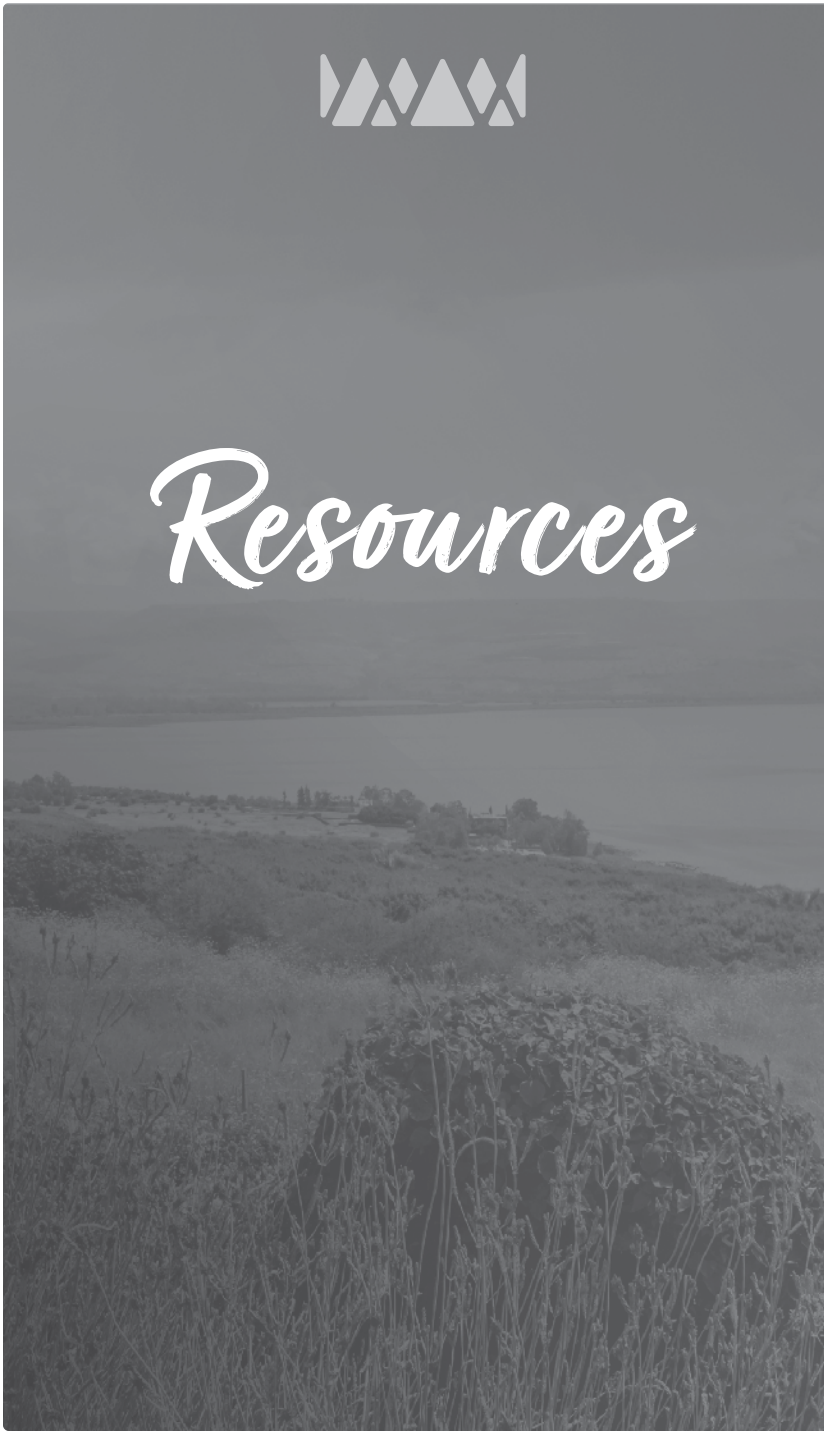
- Declare scriptural truth about the God you confess to. For example, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love" (Psalm 103:8; see also Exodus 34:6, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2).
- Humbly ask the God who loves you to reveal your sin. Confess your sins directly, knowing you will not be lost under the weight of your sins because Jesus is your righteousness. Ask God for forgiveness and thank him that he gives it to you freely.

- Ask God whether you need to ask forgiveness from others or be willing to forgive others as God has forgiven you. Spend time talking to God about those situations as honestly as possible. He might invite you to schedule a time with those involved to ask for or offer forgiveness directly. If you're not sure whether to talk to them, or if you can't, write a letter. You might never send the letter but use it as a plea before God for true healing.
- Close your time by praying for those you've sinned against and those who've sinned against you. Say their names and declare the truth of God's love for them and for you.

May God's forgiveness free you, change you, and flow out of you through the practice of confession.

God, thank You that I do not stand before You as condemned but covered by the righteousness of Christ, forgiven. May Your Spirit continue to work in me, showing me my sin and reassuring me with Your love. Amen.

NOTES


Resources

For Further Study on The Sermon on the Mount

On Earth as It Is in Heaven | The Sermon on the Mount
https://a.co/d/03EZJweC

The Sermon on the Mount by Jen Wilkin
https://www.lifeway.com/en/product-family/sermon-on-the-mount

The Sermon on the Mount Podcast series by The Bible Project
https://bibleproject.com/podcasts/series/sermon-on-the-mount/

The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing:
A Theological Commentary by Jonathan T. Pennington
https://a.co/d/02sMf0Gx

The Divine Conspiracy by Dallas Willard
https://a.co/d/01BWBDBl

The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
https://a.co/d/07Hw2JDZ

Scan the
QR code to visit the
Adelfi Conference
Website

NOTES

For Further Connection at Riverview Church

We don't want your connections to stop today. We'd love it if you consider joining a Community Group, serving on a Weekend Service team, joining a Bible study, or being a part of our Mentorship program. Find out more at **rivchurch.com/connect** and follow us on Instagram **@rivwomensministry.**

Upcoming Women's Ministry events:

Women's Connection Event
Dec. 2, 2026
7 p.m. at the Holt Venue

Women's Bible Study
Jan. 6 - May 19, 2027
Wednesdays 7 p.m. at the Westside Venue

Adelfi28
April 28 & 29, 2028
Tentative

As a church, we meet at four venues throughout the Lansing area. In addition, we meet as smaller groups in what we call Community Groups throughout the week.

We'd love for you to join us. Visit **rivchurch.com/visit** for service times.

Holt Venue
3585 Willoughby Rd.
Holt, MI 48842

MSU Venue
Meeting on campus in East Lansing

REO Town Venue
1115 S. Washington Ave.
Lansing, MI 48910

Westside Venue
7533 W. St. Joseph Hwy.
Lansing, MI 48917

Thank You!

Women's Ministry Team

Thank you so much to the Women's Ministry Team, the Conference Planning Team, and all the speakers who helped to put on this conference. These women have consistently poured endless hours into this conference because they love Jesus and they love his people. It is such a pleasure to serve alongside these ladies as we invite everyone to know and enjoy Jesus as we stumble together in our pursuit to love like him. When you see them, make sure you give them a hug! Thank you to all the volunteers who sacrificially gave of their time. We appreciate you so much. Also, thank you to the staff at Riverview Church for the endless hours they put into crafting the music, website, and graphics and so much more. This conference is truly a team effort.



Julie Partridge, Wendy Smith, Colleen Davenport, Peri Vissers, Grace Heikkinen, Jennifer Rountree, Miriam Davenport, Alex McGraw, Laura Allen, Dilyn Smith

Sydney Shultz-Kempt (not pictured)


“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”
– Matthew 5:3
RIVERVIEW
rivchurch.com
At Riv, we invite everyone to know and enjoy Jesus
as we stumble together in our pursuit to love like Him.