

## My Prayer Journal

*Use this weekly prayer to help you begin your time with God each day.*

### Prayer of Confession:

God of grace and goodness, Your mercy comes to us in ways that continually surprise us. You offer mercy with no strings attached, which is so different from the way we often act and live. Such acts of grace call many of our actions into question. Too often, we place conditions on our love and our forgiveness. Help us to see people with Jesus' eyes and to be moved by His compassion, so that we become active and fearless bearers of healing, mercy, and forgiveness.

### My Prayers this Week:

### Family Time:

When we look at the different readings throughout this week we stumbled upon many different ways of learning about who God is. We could go out and tell everyone about who God is and what He has done in our lives, or we can stick to just focusing on growing our 1-on-1 relationship with God. Neither is wrong, it just is a different way that each person learns to connect with God. Take some time as a family this week and talk about how you feel most connected to God. Is it talking to others about His works, or is working on your close relationship with Him?

## MONDAY 2.22.21

## Mark 2:13-22

Jesus gave the tax collector, Levi, the same invitation He had earlier given to Simon, Andrew, James, and John—just without the fishing context! Levi responded just as they did, immediately getting up and following Jesus. But did you notice in the story of Jesus' dinner at Levi's house that Jesus ate with, and established fellowship with, the "tax collectors and 'sinners'" BEFORE they repented of their sin? It is not simply that He "accepted them as they were, PERIOD," nor that He refused to associate with them UNTIL they repented, but that He EMBRACED them BEFORE they repented! Embracing someone does not mean approval of behavior—it DOES mean reaching out in tenderness, longing for them to return to God. He insists the sick cannot be healed unless one is willing to be with the sick. This is a very different approach from the Pharisees, who refused to associate with such people. Jesus does not make a value judgment between the two ways—but He DOES say they are mutually incompatible. Forcing His new values into the old ways could have destructive consequences. Old structures and ways of thinking must give way to new.

- Is your thinking about who you associate with more like Jesus or the Pharisees? Does anything need to "give way"?

## TUESDAY 2.23.21

## Mark 2:23-3:6

Already in Mark's Gospel, we have seen Jesus facing conflict over forgiving the sins of a paralyzed man, eating with the wrong people, and not fasting. Now, we have two more stories about conflict related to keeping the Sabbath. The traditional Jewish approach to Sabbath was to construct a fence around the actual Old Testament laws concerning Sabbath that was wider, and more extensive, than the law itself, to assure, as far as possible, the peoples' compliance with it. According to the law, only life-threatening situations or dire personal need could supersede the law regarding working on the Sabbath—and the prescribed punishment for violating the Sabbath was the death penalty. Jesus never implies that the Sabbath law is irrelevant for humanity, or to be ignored, but insists that it IS honoring the Sabbath's intended purpose to feed the hungry or heal the lame. He claims that Sabbath is really all about God's desire to ensure that humanity experiences the abundance of life He wants for us, and Sabbath rest provides for that! Traditional Judaism agreed that the good of saving a life superseded the good of keeping the Sabbath—but Jesus flips the coin, and says that failing to help someone in need is doing evil, something strictly prohibited on the Sabbath.

- How seriously do you take keeping the Sabbath?

## WEDNESDAY 2.24.21

## Mark 3:7-19

At the end of yesterday's readings, we saw Jesus' opponents begin plotting to kill Him. This caused Jesus to withdraw to the lake (the Sea of Galilee), but Mark emphasizes that people from a large geographical area were already drawn to follow Jesus. Those who wanted healing from diseases pushed forward to touch Him, while evil spirits fell down before Him. These evil spirits knew all about Jesus' identity, but were not allowed to speak about it. In contrast, at this time, Jesus' disciples, the crowds, and even His opponents had some knowledge about Jesus, but it was incomplete. Jesus thus called twelve to Him, to train in His teaching, and to whom He would hand authority to do the very things He was doing. The twelve symbolized the twelve tribes of Israel, and the formation of a NEW "people of God" who would be the first generation of an Israel restored to God's intended purpose. They are called both to be "with Him" AND to be "sent out." How can they do both? By recognizing that their first priority is to stay attached to Jesus. Then, and only, then, will they be equipped to go out to work FOR Jesus.

- Which do you prioritize in your spiritual life? Staying attached to Jesus, or getting out to do His work?

## THURSDAY 2.25.21

## Mark 3:20-34

Did you notice the "sandwich" structure of this passage? Jesus' family accuses Him, the scribes accuse Him, then Jesus answers the scribes, then Jesus answers His family. Jesus' family appears not to be following Jesus at this point—but they are probably acting from good motives, trying to rescue Jesus from others (or from Himself) but they are clearly in opposition to Jesus here, thinking He has gone mad. The scribes go further—they think Jesus is actually under the control of a demonic pagan god, Beelzebub. Jesus points out the logical flaw in this belief—by driving out demons, Jesus is working to defeat Satan! He also says that what they are saying—authoritatively attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to demonic forces—is unforgivable. All else can be forgiven, implying that if the scribes stop reversing morality and labelling "good" as "evil," even they can be forgiven. Now, when His biological family arrives, Jesus looks at His followers and tells them that in the new Israel, "family" is based on response to God's will, rather than biology. Claiming closeness to God on the basis of your religious status (like a scribe) or an ancestral line (like His mother and brothers) won't cut it. Intimacy with God (being family with Jesus) happens by clinging to God's will in Christ.

- On what basis are you claiming closeness to God?

**FRIDAY 2.26.21**

**Mark 4:1-20**

Elaborating on the theme of insiders (who embrace Jesus’ message) and outsiders (who reject it), that we saw yesterday in the story of the scribes and Jesus’ biological family, Jesus now tells a parable of the various ways His message will be received. Parables serve two functions—to hide the truth from those determined to reject it, and it enlighten those who have an open heart toward Jesus and His message. Some people never internalize the word of truth at all, having it snatched away by Satan from the start, refusing to even consider it. Others respond at first, but abandon faith when external pressures like trouble and persecution become difficult. Still others respond, but succumb to internal pressures like worry and concern over wealth. But the sower sows seed everywhere, trusting that God will produce an abundant harvest—not by our efforts, but by His. Hearts that are open to Jesus’ message are like fertile soil, where a seed can produce an abundant crop. These “insiders” have been given the ability to understand the “secrets” of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is revealing something previously hidden: the Kingdom of God will arrive gradually, not in the quick, decisive moment the Jews expected. “Outsiders” don’t even recognize it when it is in their midst.

- Where can you see signs of the Kingdom around you?

**SATURDAY 2.27.21**

**Mark 4:21-34**

Today we read two more parables relating to the Kingdom of God. But first, Jesus uses a lamp to demonstrate the way His teaching in parables is now revealing things previously hidden. The allegory is not about the future revealing of our personal secrets or hidden pasts at the day of judgment (as it is often interpreted), but about the fact that the truth of what God’s kingdom is like, and how it will arrive, has previously been hidden but is now being revealed, by Jesus! By using seeds in each of the three primary parables (yesterday’s and the two in today’s reading), Jesus demonstrates that the Kingdom’s inbreaking will be something that grows over time. Jesus promises that if we invest ourselves in listening carefully to His teaching, we will gain an abundant understanding of the Kingdom, but that if we do not, we risk losing what we already have. Seeds grow, but our own efforts are not required or involved in its growth. But even the tiny, infinitesimal mustard seed of the inbreaking Kingdom that the disciples could see in Jesus’ day would one day be immense, encompassing every nation and people. The church today IS that mustard tree, continuing to grow by God’s hand.

- What is the difference between trying to take control of someone’s faith to make it grow, and simply sowing seeds?



Daily Study Guide

February 21—27, 2021

**Sermon Series: Skeptical Faith**

**Week One: “Which is Easier?” - Rev. Gregory P. Finrock**

*Scripture for Sunday, February 21: Mark 2:1-12*

“After a few days, Jesus went back to Capernaum, and people heard that He was at home. So many gathered that there was no longer space, not even near the door. Jesus was speaking the Word to them. Some people arrived, and four of them were bringing to Him a man who was paralyzed. They couldn’t carry him through the crowd, so they tore off part of the roof above where Jesus was. When they had made an opening, they lowered the mat on which the paralyzed man was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Child, your sins are forgiven!’ Some legal experts were sitting there, muttering among themselves, ‘Why does He speak this way? He’s insulting God. Only the one God can forgive sins.’ Jesus immediately recognized what they were discussing, and He said to them, ‘Why do you fill your minds with these questions? Which is easier—to say to a paralyzed person, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Get up, take your bed, and walk”? But so you will know that the Human One has authority on the earth to forgive sins’ - He said to the man who was paralyzed, ‘Get up, take your mat, and go home.’ Jesus raised him up, and right away he picked up his mat and walked out in front of everybody. They were all amazed and praised God, saying, ‘We’ve never seen anything like this!’” (CEB)

*Things that really impacted me from today’s sermon:*

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**Prayer Requests**

- Charlotte Ottley
- Delaney Digman
- Bill Reichter
- Bob Vincent
- Sophia Miller
- Judy Hoffman
- Nini Schneider

Everyone affected by the COVID-19 outbreak

Our country and its leaders

The Callier and Emery families on the loss of Charlie Emery’s father, Dick Callier

**Share prayer requests online at [livingwordumc.org](http://livingwordumc.org)**