

WINTER 2022 FACILITATOR GUIDE

MATTHEW

LIFE TOGETHER IN THE WAY OF JESUS
BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The story of Jesus in Matthew is centrally a story about the work of God. God is fulfilling his covenant promises, like the ones we learned about in the Old Testament last fall. And God is fulfilling these promises in and through Jesus the Messiah. This is what Jesus means when he begins his ministry announcing, “the Kingdom of Heaven is now at hand.”

Matthew’s story of Jesus’ life is the story of that announcement coming true. Jesus not only announces the coming of God’s Kingdom, but he teaches us to understand it (because we often misunderstand it!), and he teaches us how to live in it.

Our Oasis vision at UALC includes the conviction that we are an oasis community, “a family of brothers and sisters in Christ learning life together in the way of Jesus by the power of the Spirit.” We are a learning community, and Jesus is our teacher.

In addition to these small group discussions, we encourage your group to join us in our Daily Worship devotions, reflecting on a different passage throughout the week that correlate and texturize the theme of our Sunday passage. You can find our Daily Worship devotions at ualc.org/dailyworship.

HOW TO USE THE FACILITATOR GUIDE

This is meant to be a resource to help you guide your group through a Bible-based discussion and into your prayer response time. You'll begin with a brief introduction to the topic, followed by a warmup question, often somewhat related to the topic of the study ahead. From there you'll read Scripture together, explore questions in an open conversation (remembering to practice good listening and encourage dialogue), and close with a time of prayer with each other. We end with prayer prompts that may help you tie these passages to the needs or desires of your group, and to bless what the Lord has done in your time together.

There are typically more questions that your group will get through. This is by design. We would rather you have more questions than you need than too few. We advise that the facilitator review the lesson ahead of the meeting and choose a few questions they'd most like to ask, so that you can skip over some questions for the sake of time. Remember, you're meeting routinely, so there will be time to circle back on these conversations again.

Please allot appropriate time for prayer at the end of your meeting. Prayer is an essential and irreplaceable part of small group. We'd rather you abbreviate the discussion and move on to prayer rather than have a long discussion and speed through prayer. That doesn't mean you can't pray efficiently (Mat 6:7), but we believe that God hears and responds to our prayers, and that we are knitted together when we pray with each other.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact Dan Kidd at dkidd@ualc.org. For more small group resources, including facilitator training, visit ualc.org/smallgroups

Special thanks to our authors: Katie Borden, Sarah Kidd, and Elaine Pierce.

GENEALOGY OF JESUS

MATTHEW 1:1-17

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 1

This week we begin a new series covering the book of Matthew, beginning with the genealogy of Jesus. We'll discuss why genealogies are important (and way more interesting than we might be inclined to treat them). You might consider having your group read this passage with pen or pencil in hand. Have them underline or circle any names that they know are major characters in the Bible, and any that they aren't familiar with at all. You could then take some time to share with each other what you know about these characters, or investigate them in Scripture together. Many Bibles have an index at the end to help you locate the passages where these characters are located, or, you can do a name search in the Bible app on your phone or at Bible.com. If your group typically uses a Bible app in small group, consider printing out the passage for them ahead of time. You can find that here: <https://my.bible.com/bible/111/MAT.1.1-17.NIV>

One thing we won't cover in the questions in our discussion, but may be useful to you and your group is that Matthew's genealogy is broken into 14 generations (which means his genealogy is 3 generations short of Chronicles), and this is no mistake. In Hebrew, the alphabet is also used as their numeric system. The letters in the word David (דוד) added together equal 14. Scholars have long believed that this is Matthew's way of emphasizing Jesus' place as the true "son of David." All this to say, there's way more than meets the eye in this genealogy, and when we read it closely it has a great deal to show us!

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This week we will begin reading through the Gospel of Matthew together. The Gospel of Jesus, according to Matthew, is the story of God's work in the world, in and through his people, throughout history. Jesus is the anointed one (*messiah*), who fulfills the promises of God and grants hope to the hopeless and joy to the mourning. The Gospel of Matthew illustrates for us what Jesus means in his proclamation "the Kingdom of Heaven is now at hand." And being the gracious and wise teacher that he is, Jesus tells and shows us what this Kingdom is like and how we can enjoy it for ourselves.

We begin with the first verses of the New Testament, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. And you might be thinking, "aren't genealogies just the boring lists of names we read over before we get to the real Bible stories?" But, for the authors of the Bible, genealogies are deeply meaningful and important narrative devices. They are the authors ways of telling dozens of stories, reminding us of countless works of the Lord, in only a few short sentences. Each name, each portion, and even the structure of the genealogy has something crucial to tell us about who Jesus is and what his life and ministry mean.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever been told you resemble a family member? In what ways (your appearance, your personality, the way you speak, etc.)?
- Have you ever known anyone related to someone famous? Who was it and how were they related? (Bonus points if you can share a fun anecdote with the group.)

As mentioned before, today we're talking about Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. This genealogy has a number of familiar, larger-than-life characters in it—and some who may not be familiar at all. But we will explore together how this passage speaks volumes about the person and ministry of Jesus.

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Father, we thank you for Jesus. Thank you that became human to be God with us. We pray that you would meet us in our study and discussion today; that we would encounter you and know you more, so that we may love you more. Amen*

SCRIPTURE:

You may want to invite your group to have a pen or pencil ready as today's passage is read, marking any names that are particularly familiar, or particularly unfamiliar.

Have someone read Isaiah Matthew 1:1-17. Remember to thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

The Gospel of Matthew, and the New Testament, begins by identifying Jesus as the anointed one "Messiah," "the son of David, the son of Abraham."

- Why is it of primary importance to Matthew that we relate Jesus to David and to Abraham? What does this tell us about the identity of Jesus?
 - There are several correct answers here. David represents the kingship and flourishing of Israel, the promise that God's people will be blessed, cared for, and justice would reign. Abraham, among other things, is the one for whom God called out to father a people who would be blessed in order to bless the entire world. The line of Abraham and the line of David are known for God's promises to bring his Kingdom, his peace, and his justice.
- As we read through this genealogy, is there anything that stands out to you? Anything you find interesting or curious about this genealogy?

- Your group might notice that on occasion the mothers are listed in the lineage; Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba (unnamed, but titled Solomon’s mother who had been married to Uriah).
 - You may notice a mixture of kings and “civilians,” and perhaps some scandals (like that of Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba.)
- **Why do you think Matthew chose to name some of the women in this genealogy, especially those who might be scandalous like Tamar, Rahab, or Bathsheba?**
 - Matthew is clearly not interested in hiding away the sinfulness or scandal of humanity, not even as it applies to Jesus’ lineage. Not only can God use humanity’s fallenness for his own glory, sinfulness is the reason the world needs Jesus as a rescuer. Matthew may also have named Gentiles like Rahab and Ruth to demonstrate that Jesus’ Kingdom is not only for the Jews, but for the whole world.

One interesting feature of this genealogy that can unfortunately be lost in translation is that Matthew, in Greek, has altered some of the letters of the names in the genealogy from Chronicles. The name Asa was replaced with the name Asaph (from the book of Psalms) and Amon was replaced with Amos (the famous prophet). The NIV “corrects” these names to match Chronicles, but the NRSV translates Matthew’s differences.

- **Why do you think the Gospel of Matthew would intentionally include a psalmist and a prophet in the genealogy of Jesus?**
 - This is almost certainly a narrative device intended to show that Jesus is also a continuation and fulfillment of every part of the Bible: the patriarchs and kings, the poets and prophets are all pointing to Jesus.

The reason biblical authors include genealogies is that each name acts like a suitcase—containing a variety of stories and memories in an efficient packaging. Each name here represents a whole story, many of them detailed throughout the pages of the Bible, and all of these stories, according to Matthew, have something important and necessary to tell us about Jesus.

- **What names do you recognize from this list? Can you share a little bit about their story with the group?**
 - Allow time for your group members to share. If you suspect there are some names the group is likely to know, you might bring them up. Feel free to lead as example with one of the names you recognize and what you know about them.
- **What names do you not recognize or don’t remember much about in this list? Who in the list would you like to know more about?**
 - Use this as an opportunity to discuss some of the stories of the characters in this list that are unfamiliar to some or all of the group. You might want to use the index in the back of your Bible, or a search on the Bible app to find where their stories are in the Bible.
- **What might Matthew be wanting to communicate to us about Jesus through these characters and stories we’ve just spoken about?**

Matthew concludes his genealogy by emphasizing that there have been 3 sets of 14 generations between Abraham and Jesus the Messiah. (Abraham – David, David – exile to Babylon, Babylon – Jesus).

- Why has Matthew emphasized these groups of 14? What significance do they add to the story of Jesus?
 - There are many correct answers here, but certainly we are meant to notice that God has been carefully at work throughout the history of his people, and just like Abraham, David, and the return from Exile, the birth of Jesus is an enormous event the story of God’s people, and the age to come will be remarkably different because of Christ.
- Why do you think it might have been so important to Matthew that Jesus is the continuation and fulfilment of the Old Testament and Israelite history?
 - Receive all answers. We cannot know for sure, but it’s likely that Matthew wanted to express that the Lord has always intended the Kingdom coming as it did through Jesus, and that the prophecies, laws, stories, and songs of the Old Testament have something to tell us about Jesus, and Jesus is the key to understanding them.

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Today’s passage has a lot to say about who Jesus is, and what Jesus’ ministry would be like. Incredibly, Jesus’ story is still being told today. We believe that King Jesus is on his throne and transforming the world today.

Share with one another ways that you have recently experienced the Lord’s presence in your own story. How has Jesus met you recently? Is there anything going on in your life currently where you want the Lord’s presence and help? Share this with the group too.

Close by praying thanks and petitions for the Lord’s work in our lives.

BAPTISM OF JESUS

MATTHEW 3:1-17

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 2

Today's discussion centers around Jesus' baptism. In one of our questions, we invite the group to imagine what it might be like to have been there at Jesus' baptism; a witness to all that is described there (and maybe more). Give your group plenty of time to imagine this together; encourage them to really submerge themselves into the amazing scene at the very outset of Jesus' ministry. You might consider having them close their eyes as you read vv.13-17 two or three times again, inviting them to turn their attention to a new sense (sound, smell, temperature) or detail. Because of the general brevity of this passage, take advantage of the richness of this scene, seeking to encounter God in his words.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This is the second week of our study of the Gospel according to Matthew. Last week we looked closely at Jesus' genealogy – what a cast of characters is in his ancestry! Saints and sinners, to be sure. Jews and Gentiles as well. We can take great reassurance that people just like us are part of God's Family Tree. In today's passage we read about Jesus' baptism. We'll look at who baptized him, why he was baptized, and the difference it makes for our lives. It is important to note that, while only 2 of the gospels include the story of Jesus' birth, all 4 of the gospels include the story of Jesus' baptism.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- When you were baptized, how much water did it take?
Use this tongue-in-cheek question to give your group the opportunity to talk personally about their baptism experience. You will probably have people in your group who were baptized as infants and others who were baptized as adults. Take a few minutes to talk about different experiences.

OPENING PRAYER:

Lord we ask that you lead us and bless us as we read your word together. Give us insight into you, your world, and your Truth. We long to encounter you today, Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Matthew 3:1-17. Be sure to thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

Take a few minutes to remind the group who John is. Jesus' mother Mary and John's mother Elizabeth were "related," perhaps cousins (though the word *cousin* wasn't used until Wycliffe's translation in the 14th century). John was a few months older than Jesus.

- **What kind of preacher was John? Do you think he'd be a comfortable fit as a preacher at UALC?**
 - It's unusual for narrators in the Bible to give us much detail about characters like their clothing or their diet unless they intend to emphasize how distinct it is or meaningful to the story. So, when we read that John wore camel's hair with a leather belt and that he ate locusts and wild honey, we're meant to recognize that he would stand out as peculiar to the crowd. He was also rather straightforward about the wrath of God leveled at the sinful; particularly the sinful religious leaders.
 - It's likely that most congregants in any church would find John a bit uncomfortable, both for his appearance and for his prophetic accusations. That said, clearly he was compelling to those who responded to him and who were baptized.
- **What kind of baptism did John practice? What was its purpose?**
 - v.11 tells us he baptized with water, for the purpose of repentance (in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom and the Messiah). He expressly differentiates this from the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire from the one who would come after him.
- **Why did Jesus want to be baptized?**
 - Receive all answers. Notice how John tried to reject his request: "I need to be baptized by you!"
- **What was the purpose of Jesus' baptism?**
 - This is an important principle. Jesus, who had no sin, took on our sin on the cross. But before that, he was baptized. Baptism is a sign of repentance: the water pours over our sins. Jesus had no need for repentance, but he took our place so that we could receive eternal life.
 - Jesus' baptism initiated his ministry; it's where God the Father explicitly expressed his favor over Jesus and the Holy Spirit visibly fell on Christ as a symbol of what God would do.
 - Jesus acknowledges the importance of baptism in the life of Christians, and models it himself; as all good teachers do.
- **Imagine for a moment that you are in the crowd of witnesses when Jesus was baptized. What do you imagine it looked like? What do you hear? What do you feel? How do you respond to seeing all this happen?**
 - Note particularly hearing the voice of the Lord, reciting Psalm 2:7, and seeing the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus. Consider what you might think about all this if you were to see it first hand.

Verse 17 says "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'"

- **Is this a statement that you feel confident God can say about you? Why or why not?**

- This is a complicated question. On the one hand, we are expressly told that God loves us deeply, and certainly he is pleased with us insofar as we are his creation. But also, deep down, we all want to be worthy of the Kingdom of God, but we know we haven't earned it on our own merits. We have, of course, fallen short of the glory of God. We would rather that Jesus be an example rather than a savior. But he substituted for us, first in baptism, then in death on the cross. He was sinless; we are not. Perhaps your group can affirm this statement – that God is well pleased with us, *because of what his Son did for us.*
 - After this “mountaintop experience,” what happened next in the life of Jesus?
 - Have your group take a sneak peek at chapter 4 – immediately after this baptism, which must have been incredibly moving with the heavens opening and a dove descending, Jesus is tempted by Satan (4:1).
 - Why do you think Satan chose this moment in Jesus' story to tempt him?
 - Is it your experience that temptation often follows “mountaintop experiences” in your faith life? If so, why do you think that is?
 - Share personal experiences if the group is willing. (For example, you might have gone on a spiritual weekend retreat, and by Wednesday of the next week, you are having a terrible time with sin.) Baptism and temptation seem to go hand in hand. When we live into the calling God has over our lives, when we walk in the way of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, we and the world around us are transformed to be more Kingdom-like. This is a devastating blow to the enemy, and as such, Satan will always look for a way to distract us from God's word and God's work in and through our lives.
 - How has God affirmed that you are a child of God?
-

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Ask your group how we might pray for them this week. In response to today's passage, perhaps the group can spend some time thanking God for their own baptism and reflecting on the promised assurance that they are God's beloved child.

If you feel so led, you may have your group break into pairs or triads and share with each other ways that the enemy is prone to disrupt or tempt them away from God's will and way. Pray for God's protection and presence in defense against the devil and his snares.

SALT & LIGHT

MATTHEW 5:13-20

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 3

As we journey further into the gospel of Matthew, our picture of Jesus—as well as what he offers and requires of us—begins to complicate. Today we will be touching on what Lutherans fondly refer to as the law/gospel dialectic—the inherent tension between the law and the gospel is that they are seemingly opposite and both true and necessary. Depending on your group members’ personalities and/or historical relationships with the church, you may find that some individuals struggle with a sense of guilt that the word “law” brings, while others lick their chops at the opportunity to be “rule-followers.” Our hope and prayer is that both groups of people (and everyone in between!) will find this conversation enlightening, encouraging and inspiring.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Today we will be reading a portion of the gospel of Matthew that is part of the Sermon on the Mount—an inspiring and challenging vision that Jesus lays out, demonstrating what life in the Kingdom of God aspires to. While many discussion groups may center on the implications of these words for us (and rightly so), let’s focus the majority of our time discovering what this text actually tells us about Jesus himself.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Would you consider yourself a “rule-follower” or a “free spirit?” Or perhaps something in-between?
If group members are willing to share enjoyable anecdotes that support their answer, this could be a great community-building moment.
- What do you think of when you hear the word “law?”
Answers will vary; consider opening discussion to the distinction between laws of nature, civil law, spiritual law, ten commandments, “law and order”, etc.

As we dig into Matthew 5, let’s consider Jesus’ relationship with law.

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Lord, as we sit with each other and with your word today, open our eyes anew to who you are as reveal in Jesus. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone open their Bible to Matthew 5:13-20 and read aloud. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

Re-read vv.13-16

- What do the metaphors “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” mean to you as Jesus is using them?
 - Answers will vary; Jesus is establishing that his followers are distinct and transformative in the world.
- Jesus directs us to shine like a light before others, “that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” What does a person whose light shines brightly look like? What characteristics might they be known for?
- Does this passage feel encouraging or burdensome to you? Why?
 - Receive all answers. The goal here is to set up conversation about law—the established way God has ordered creation, and how we do or do not live up to that ideal—and gospel, the comforting word of hope that Jesus lives up to that ideal even in our inability.

Have someone re-read vv.17-20.

- What do you suppose Jesus means when he says, “I have not come to abolish [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfill them” (v.17)?
 - Answers will vary; Jesus does not supersede nor nullify the Old Testament commands, laws, or convictions from the Prophets. Rather, he demonstrates the deeper heart behind the “rules”, establishing the “law” of love.
 - St. Paul instructs that the laws of Moses were but concessions for those unable to uphold the underlying, timeless laws given to Abraham at the beginning of God’s story of his people: you are blessed in order to be a blessing, therefore love God and love one another. This Jesus does entirely, in word and deed.

In verse 3 we read: He said to me, “*You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.*” Jesus, the servant, is the new servant from the nation of Israel—fulfilling the longings and prophecies from centuries before. As Christians we are called to continue the work of Christ.

- How do we, as workers of Christ, “display God’s splendor”?
 - Other translations use the phrase “show my glory” and “I will be glorified”. The Hebrew verb used here means to burst forth and become visible. God’s glory is God made visible in the world through how we love and serve others

- How are we to understand Jesus’ statement in v.20: “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven?”
 - This is likely to bring questions and may make some group members uncomfortable. This portion of Scripture can be thought of as functioning on our hearts the way the Law does: revealing our need for Jesus. A major stumbling block for us can be that we overestimate our righteousness, or we believe that comparing ourselves to other, less righteous people can satisfy our consciences. We cannot be righteous on our own accord, but we receive Jesus’ righteousness as our own. (This good news is the gospel function of this passage).
- If we cannot follow or fulfill the Law on our own, what is the point of trying to keep the Law? Why does Jesus seem to take following the Law so seriously in this passage?
 - It is CRITICAL to assure your group that our works, and how well we do or do not follow the Law, is NOT a salvific requirement. We simply do not earn or lose our salvation based on how well we follow the Law. However, our living in line with the vision of God’s Kingdom that Jesus lays out here is both a response to his salvific work in our lives AND a means of loving our neighbor.
 - In other words, part of what we inherit in our salvation, what we are saved into, is the ability to be transformed by the Holy Spirit and be conduits of God’s love, mercy, and mission.
- Given our conversation thus far, what do you find inspiring about this passage?
 - This is a great opportunity to lean into the salvation and resurrection power found in Jesus—this is comforting and joyful gospel news!
- How might this passage, and our conversation about it, lead you to see Jesus differently?
- Can you think of a time when God answered a prayer in a way you hoped? Did you realize later that God was doing something bigger than you could have imagined with that answered prayer?
 - Accept all answers. You might circle back to the opening question about movies/books with an unexpected ending. The movie could have ended with Israel being freed from Babylon and returning home, but God had a bigger story to tell. The story could have ended with Jesus dying on the cross, but God had an unexpected twist in store. He is risen!

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Spend some time in the large group thanking Jesus for who he has revealed himself to be in Scripture. Invite the Holy Spirit to continue to pour light into you, so that you might be a light, a beacon towards Christ, in a world full of darkness.

GIVING TO THE NEEDY

MATTHEW 6:1-4

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 4

Today's passage discusses the topic of quiet, humble charity. One of our questions asks the group to think of someone they know who is quietly and humbly generous. This might be a great opportunity for you to encourage someone(s) in your group by expressing how you witness their routine, humble generosity in whatever gifts they give.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Matthew's Gospel story of Jesus is the story of God's work throughout history and across the earth. This book proclaims, boldly, that Jesus is the anointed one (*messiah*), who fulfills the promises of God and announced that the Kingdom is now at hand. The Gospel of Matthew often depicts Jesus as the authoritative teacher on the way of God's Kingdom. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are being transformed (and thus, transforming the world around us), into the people God intended us to be. And, as is the way of all great teachers, Jesus instructs us both in word and in deeds—that we may hear him *and* emulate him.

Today we pick up the story of Jesus in chapter 6, in his instructions about how we are to be charitable. As we'll see, this passage intends to guide us in balancing righteousness for the sake of the Lord and our neighbor without stumbling into self-righteousness.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- If you were to appear on a celebrity edition of a famous game show, where you were playing for a charity of your choice, what organization would you choose and why?
- Have you ever known someone who was remarkably generous? How so? How did witnessing that person's generosity make you feel?

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Lord it is our pleasure to be with one another and with you today. As we hear your word together, teach us and empower us to be generous and humble; to hold onto the things of this world more loosely so that we may clutch the things of Heaven more tightly. Lead us in our discussion and reveal yourself to us. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Matthew 6:1-4.

Since this is such a short passage, you might invite another person to read from a different translation.

DISCUSSION:

- Based on the context in this passage, what kind of behavior has Jesus seen in practice that has led him to this teaching?
 - It's clear that there are those who are announcing their charity high and low, seeking the admiration of others.
- What do you think might lead us to want to publicize our charity?
 - You might consider with your group how tempting it is to be known to be a good person. In fact, Scriptures often encourages having a reputation of righteousness.
 - There's also the point that sometimes when someone announces their charity to someone in need that inspires others to be charitable also. And while that may be true to an extent, perhaps Jesus knows humanity well enough to know that the temptation of self-righteousness is broadly a more likely motive than inspiration.

Last week we heard Jesus' instructions from Chapter 5, where Jesus said, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

- How might we simultaneously be known for our good deeds while not announcing them? Have you ever known someone who did this well?
- What exactly is wrong with being appreciated for our generosity? Why shouldn't the world know when we do good things for other people?
 - Receive all answers. One possibility is that the traps of self-righteousness, looking for worth from others, or measuring ourselves against others is so very easy to fall into that we are better off when we remove the temptation as much as possible.
 - There may also be the temptation to bind the amount of our charity to the amount of praise we get for it, so that when others seem less impressed with us for being generous, we become less generous.
- It's clear by Jesus' phrasing that there's a presumption that we will give to those in need. Why does Jesus presume that? If not for the admiration of others, why should we give away what is ours?
 - First and foremost, all of us rely on and receive the gifts of others. In material ways, and in ways of service, or the gifts the Spirit has given others. We all need to be loved, and cared for, and prayed for. The world would be in a devastatingly broken state if we were to stop giving away what God

has gifted us. God's will is and has always been to bless us, uniquely, so that we might be a blessing to others.

- God is generous. When we are generous, we live life in the way of God.
 - Added to this, we are assured that our Father in Heaven knows of our generosity and rewards us accordingly.
- **Have you ever known someone who was deeply in need of help? Did someone help them? If so, how?**
 - Let this be an opportunity to provide real-life examples of how charity is needed, and the Kingdom value charity offers when we bless others with our resources.

In the passage immediately before this passage Jesus instructs his followers to not only love their neighbors, but to love their enemies, and to pray for those who persecute them.

- **Do you believe that these passages are connected to each other? How might quiet generosity go together with the practice of loving our enemies?**
 - Love is generous. When someone withholds generosity from us it is likely that we question whether or not they truly love us. When we love others, we share with them, and we see and attend to their needs.
 - If we are to practice loving our enemies (as well as our neighbors) then we must be open to meeting the needs of even those who are our enemies. Consider asking your group, "How might we Christians show quiet charity to our enemies?"
- **In what ways do Christians quietly bless the world around us?**
 - Consider together the individuals and activities that routinely but humbly meet the needs of others. This may look like food pantries, or ESL classes, or ethical business practices, or being a reliably peace-seeking, kind friend.
- **In what ways can Christians do more to care for the world around us without boasting?**
 - Hopefully, as we broadly consider what more the Church could be doing for others, the Spirit will convict and empower each of us as individuals about how we might share our blessedness with others.

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Consider using this passage as an opportunity to prayerfully ask the Lord how he might increase our generosity while protecting us from self-righteousness or comparison. In the spirit of being quiet about our call to charity, you may choose not to share with each other what the Lord has placed on your heart, but rather choose to pray God's blessing over each other; that we each may be empower to trust the Lord and give away to others what they might need.

PRAYER

MATTHEW 6:5-15, 7:7-12

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 5

Our discussion this week is inspired by portions of the 6th and 7th chapters of the book of Matthew.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

The Gospel of Matthew illustrates for us what an incredible, empowering teacher Jesus is.

Our vision for UALC includes the conviction that we are an oasis community, “a family of brothers and sisters in Christ learning life together in the way of Jesus by the power of the Spirit.” We are a learning community, and Jesus, as we see so clearly in the stories of Matthew, is our wise, worthy, and perfect teacher; who not only tells us how we might live, but imbues us with the Spirit that allows us to follow in his way.

In today’s passages, Jesus instructs his followers on how we are to pray.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- When you think of the topic or practice of “prayer,” what comes to mind? What is prayer?
There are several great answers to this question, but for the sake of our discussion later, a primary definition of prayer is simply communicating with the Lord (that is, listening to and speaking with).
- What are some misconceptions people might have about prayer?

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Lord it is our pleasure to be with one another and with you today. Lead us in this time we’re sharing together and reveal yourself to us. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Our first passage today is from chapter 6 of the book of Matthew. Here, Jesus is speaking to his disciples and illustrates his perspective on prayer. He demonstrates what it looks like to pray with improper motives, and then he also gives his disciples an example of how they should pray

Have someone read Matthew 6:5-15. Thank them for reading

DISCUSSION:

- In verses 5-8, Jesus compares what it looks like to pray with improper versus proper motives. Why do our motives for prayer matter?
- Was there anything particularly unfamiliar, challenging, or strange to you about these four verses (5-8)?
 - Receive all answers. Ponder any questions your group may have together.
- Why do you think Jesus taught this instruction about praying in public? What was he responding to? What is the problem with the prayers of the hypocrites Jesus is instructing against?
 - In verse 5, Jesus warns that **public attention** was the only reward of people whose motives for prayer was to be seen by others/observed in public. Jesus is not condemning public prayer, but verse 6 further illustrates his point that prayer should be driven by a personal effort to know and conform to God's will.
- What does it look like when you make the space and time to pray to God "in secret?" Is this something you're in a routine of doing? Do you ever struggle to pray on your own?
 - Encountering God alone, in privacy, may look differently for each of us. For example, the thought of private prayer may be intimidating, exhilarating, peaceful, or any other adjective of choice.
 - Try to avoid anyone in your group feeling shame for not praying as they should (the truth is we will always be seeking to pray more, because we have been created to commune with God, always). Instead receive what is shared and share honestly yourself. Perhaps hearing and sharing one another's struggles will let us know we're not alone.

A routine of private prayer can be challenging for a number of reasons. Which is why we've created so many disciplines, schedules, written so many books, and joined prayer groups in order to help us be more consistent, more faithful in our prayer life. And Christians have been praying together for centuries. We're even instructed to pray with and for one another consistently throughout the epistles (1 John 5 for example). We shouldn't abandon praying together, or feel guilty for finding help in public prayer, or any other discipline to help us to pray. The main concern for Jesus is motive.

In verse 7, Jesus criticizes people who repetitiously babble on and on with meaningless phrases, as though God is inclined to answer longer prayers.

- Why did Jesus identify long-winded, repetitious prayer (or babbling on) as inappropriate?
 - Receive all answers. One issue with this type of praying is that it's meant to glorify the one praying rather than the Lord being prayed to. Another is that our long windedness or eloquence wrongly assumes that the quality of a prayer is in its construction or presentation, and that has something to do with whether the Lord will respond to it. This underestimates the Lord and his relationship with us.

- Have you ever experienced someone praying where they seemed to be performing for their own sake, or they rambled on and on? What thoughts crossed your mind during that prayer?
 - Steer the group away from gossip—naming names is not productive to this conversation—but this will demonstrate for us all the consequences of long or performative pray.

Jesus knew God as his own father and proceeded to teach his disciples to trust in him as their father too. The words Jesus models for us in “Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name” are expressing a dynamic acknowledgement of God being our father (someone who knows and loves us) and a transcendent being in heaven that deserves our reverence.

- For personal reflection, and please share if you’re comfortable: how do you usually address God when you’re praying? Why? Is there anyway of addressing God that you find uncomfortable?
 - Receive all answers and thank them for sharing.

It’s common to identify seven petitions making up The Lord’s Prayer in verses 9-13. Three have to do with God (that God’s name be hallowed, that God’s kingdom come, and that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven), and four have to do with people (requests for daily bread, forgiveness of debts, avoidance of trial, and rescue from evil).

- Are there any petitions in this prayer you find more challenging than the others?

Have someone read Matthew 7:7-12 and thank them for reading.

Our English translation of the Bible in verse 7 uses the present imperative forms of the verbs “ask,” “seek,” and “knock.” Here, Jesus is implying – he is stressing – the importance of persistent prayer. Although Jesus teaches us that persistent prayer will bring an answer, he never says the answers we receive will necessarily be exactly what we’ve asked for.

- Can you share with us a time in your life, or the life of someone you know, when they were “knocking” persistently so-to-speak in their prayer life, but an unexpected door opened for them?

Jesus teaches us that we do not need to fear that God will dismiss us or us because of our prayers, or that God will respond to our prayers badly. Verse 11 explains that our Father in heaven gives good gifts to those who ask him. Again, there is a not a promise of our prayers being answered precisely along the terms we ask, but Jesus emphasizes the goodness of the gifts for which we could be recipients

- How should we respond to this word from Jesus?

Verse 12 has come to be known as the Golden Rule. Historically, in the Jewish culture, this saying was well known in the negative form, and Jesus now was speaking of the law in a positive, active form. For example, original Jewish law and tradition was to *keep from doing to others what one did not want done to themselves*. Jesus now set a higher standard, so-to-speak, instructing his followers to not merely “not do something undesirable,” but now treat others in the same way they would like those others to treat

them.

- Why do you suppose, after five verses on the topic of prayer, does Jesus proceed with v. 12 and the Golden Rule?
 - Receive all answers. Certainly, our relationship with God, established and transformed through prayer, will influence the way we interact with others. This is another expression of the unity between right relationship with God and one another.
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PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Today's lesson centers on praying with right motives, and with expectation that the Father is generous and able to hear and respond to our prayers. Take this time to encourage your group to pray with each other, avoiding the snares Jesus warned about, but instead, trusting that the Lord hears our simple and honest words for him.