



WEEK 3 STUDY GUIDE

Read [Luke 18:9-14](#).

In these verses, Jesus demonstrated the power of teaching by using a parable, a story that draws a parallel between an eternal truth and everyday life. Right from the start, Jesus was intentional about his audience—“some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else.” Self-righteousness is incredibly dangerous because it leads to pride and an attempt to live outside of God’s plan.

People near Jerusalem often went to pray at the Temple, the center of Jewish worship. Jesus shared this parable to show what really matters: It’s not about praying out loud or the style of prayer. It’s about the heart behind our prayers.

The Pharisee in this parable didn’t necessarily show up to pray to God. Yes, technically, he was praying, but his heart was focused on himself. He wanted everyone within earshot to hear and know and recognize how wonderful he was. He was following the laws and thought he was better than others—especially someone as disgraceful as a “despised tax collector.”

On the other hand, this tax collector stood off to the side. Not everyone could hear him. He was honest and authentic with God. He pleaded with God because he was a sinner in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness. There were no righteous acts to report publicly, and it sounded like a shorter prayer. He was simply broken and knew he needed God.

So who went home justified before God? The tax collector. This must have angered those who were listening. How can this be? The Pharisee was doing all the right things, yet the man who showed a simple and genuine faith had his prayer answered. To explain this ending, Jesus switched up the societal normal: “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

WEEK 3 OVERVIEW

THE MAIN POINT

Jesus wants us to be real with Him:
in our prayers and in our lives.

THE BIBLE

[Luke 18:9-14](#)

TOUGH PARABLES

Wrestling With Jesus' Challenging Stories

Week 3: The Two Prayers

Main Point: Jesus wants us to be real with Him: in our prayers and in our lives.

Main Scripture: [Luke 18:9-14](#)

THE WHAT

ME

Share about a funny moment where you felt awkward in prayer and/or show this awkward prayer video: [youtube.com/watch?v=wuMvKwmMv5Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wuMvKwmMv5Q) (or find a video on the theme of awkward prayers). You will need an Internet connection and a computer or tablet to display the video for your students.

WE

Ask:

- What was the most awkward part of that video, and why?
- Why would someone pray the way Pastor Dave prayed in this video?
- What's it like to experience or witness this in real life?

TRANSITION

Awkward! While praying for and with someone is an incredible way to be a friend, Pastor Dave's approach just made things awkward and uncomfortable for Joseph. Like many people, Pastor Dave wanted to be seen as super-religious. He used all the spiritual words, drew a crowd, and sought admiration for his "spiritualness." But Jesus wants us to be genuine and authentic—that's the kind of prayer he desires and rewards.

SO WHAT

GOD

Read [Luke 18:9-14](#) together.

This parable reveals a lot about prayer—how prayer has everything to do with the heart. Let's take a few minutes to explore the differences between the Pharisee's prayer and the tax collector's prayer.

1. The Pharisee's prayer was weak.

We all compare ourselves with others—it's a tough habit to break. When we make good, healthy, Jesus-honoring choices, we can feel good about those choices—when our choices are a direct result of Jesus' work in us. In this parable, the Pharisee wasn't relying on God. Self-righteousness grows when we depend more on following the rules than depending on Jesus and the sacrifice he made for us on the cross. In other words, the Pharisee's prayer was EXTRA and we don't need to try to hold ourselves to the same standards because Jesus isn't looking for extra prayers.

2. The tax collector's prayer was powerful.

The tax collector was deeply humble. He had nothing to bring to God but himself. He was a sinner with no righteous accomplishments. He needed God. He needed God's forgiveness and mercy. God honored the tax collector's genuine prayer. Jesus wants us to be real and authentic and honest when we pray. He wants to experience life right along with us—both the good and the bad.

3. Jesus wants us to be real with Him: in our prayers and in our lives.

You decided how you pray. Jesus often said things that directly challenged the common thinking and religious teachings of his time. This was one of those times: “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Just like Jesus switched things up in society, you can switch things up in your own life. I used to be SO embarrassed to pray in front of others. I thought I had to use really big, strange words like “God, thank you for this bountiful meal” or something like that. But as I grew in my faith, and as I read this parable, I realize I don’t have to have things all fancy and together to pray to God - I can just be myself within - even when myself is a mess.

GOSPEL MOMENT

In fact, once I realized that I thought - of course! Because isn’t Jesus just gracious to us like that? We didn’t earn our salvation by being perfect and always having things together - we are saved by His grace - a gift freely given to us when we chose to believe and give our hearts to God. Jesus died to pay the penalty of our sins, even while we were still sinners.

TRANSITION

Jesus isn’t looking for us to act like we are perfect, He knows the real us and He loves the real us. Jesus wants us to be real with Him - in our prayers and in our lives.

NOW WHAT?

YOU

Idk about you, but I’m real encouraged that Jesus isn’t asking for my prayers to be fancy - He just wants me to be real. That takes a LOT of pressure off! And I love that Jesus says He wants us to pray and talk to Him. Prayer is a conversation - one we can have at any time with God.

WE

Instead of just talking about prayer, let’s take some time together to PRAY! This will be a time of silent prayer—just you and Jesus. Remember what we discussed about being real with Jesus, reflecting the attitude displayed by the tax collector. Jesus knows what decisions you’ve made, what’s going well in your life, and what’s going poorly. Talk with him about anything that’s going on. Encourage students to each find a quiet spot in your meeting area for a few minutes of prayer and reflection.
PRO TIP: Pick a worship song to play quietly in the background, and let students know when the song is over you’ll close all together in prayer.

PRAY

Closing prayer [after a few minutes of silent prayer]: Jesus, thank you for loving the real us. Help us to remember we can always be real with you, and that you desire us to pray to you - we don’t need big words or to make a show for others - but we can just open our hearts and be real with you. Thank you for loving us so much! Please be with everyone this week and may everyone feel your love for them as they go through their lives this week. We love you and praise you. Amen.

WEEK 3 TOUGH PARABLES DISCUSSION GUIDE

This guide is a suggestion; Adjust as needed to fit your group. Don't feel like you need to do, or ask, everything you see here. Let the students and the Holy Spirit guide the conversation, too.

THE MAIN POINT

Jesus wants us to be real with Him:
in our prayers and in our lives.

THE MAIN SCRIPTURE

[Luke 18:9-14](#)

GET THEM TALKING

- Who can share a funny story about an awkward prayer?

READ [Luke 18:9-14](#) and answer the following questions:

1. The Pharisee's prayer was weak.

- What is most surprising or unexpected to you about this parable?
- Think about a time when you made yourself look better by pointing out another person's faults. What was the end result?
- When the Pharisee listed all of his accomplishments in his prayer, was he talking to God or talking to people who could hear him? How do you know?
- How do we get caught in the trap of praying the way the Pharisee prayed?
- Why is pride so tempting, so tasty, so appealing?

2. The tax collector's prayer was powerful.

- The tax collector didn't display the same attitude as the Pharisee—he kept his distance. When do you feel like you must keep your distance from Jesus?
- Is it easier to be genuine when things are going well for you or when things are going poorly? Why?
- What's most powerful about the tax collector's prayer?
- Describe a time when you prayed like the tax collector—a simple, heart-wrenching, genuine prayer.
- When do you find it tough to be real with Jesus?

3. Jesus wants us to be real with Him: in our prayers and in our lives.

- Jesus' words in verse 14 about being humbled and being exalted—how do they challenge our culture's attitude?
- How would you feel if you humbled yourself but weren't honored the way you expected?
- Can the tax collector's prayer just be imitated, or does it only flow from something deeper? Explain your perspective.
- How does the tax collector's prayer challenge you to think differently about prayer?

NEXT STEPS

- What would it look like to regularly pray to God?
- What are some ways to respond if you find yourself feeling good or bad simply because you've compared yourself with another person?
- This week, how can you turn the attention away from you and toward other people—and how can that help you pursue Christlike humility?
- What other specific, practical habits or choices can help you pursue a path of humility?

PRAYER GUIDE

Ask your students to share any prayer requests, and close together in prayer.