

SERMON SERIES & STUDY: AUG 9 - SEPT 27

FORMED

Who's Shaping Your Life?

A STUDY COMPANION FOR SMALL GROUPS AND PERSONAL REFLECTION

About This Study Companion

Every day, we are being shaped by something. The voices we trust, the habits we repeat, the values we embrace, and the stories we tell about ourselves all influence who we are becoming. *Formed: Who's Shaping Your Life?* is an eight-week invitation to place that ongoing process more intentionally in the hands of Christ.

This companion is designed to stand between a devotional guide and a close Biblical study. Each session offers enough historical and theological context to support careful reading while leaving generous room for honest conversation, spiritual reflection, and faithful practice. It does not attempt to settle every interpretive question. Instead, it helps groups read carefully, think deeply, listen to one another, and put what they learn into practice.

A Wesleyan Lens on Formation

United Methodists understand grace as God's active love meeting us before we recognize it, reconciling us through Christ, and continuing to sanctify us by healing and reshaping our lives in love. We do not earn this grace through spiritual practices. Practices are means of grace: ordinary ways we become available to what God is already doing. Scripture, prayer, Holy Communion, Christian conversation, works of mercy, and acts of justice are not merely religious tasks. In the Spirit's hands, they become places where holy love forms a people.

How to Use Each Session

Here is a suggested outline to help guide each session. Feel free to adapt it to fit your group's needs and available time.

- **Gather (5–10 minutes):** Welcome one another. Name what you are carrying. Open with prayer.
- **Read (10 minutes):** Read the primary Gospel passage aloud, slowly, perhaps in two translations. Notice before explaining.
- **Explore (20–25 minutes):** Use the context, commentary, and supporting text to examine what the passage says and how it functions.
- **Discuss (20–25 minutes):** Choose the questions that best fit your group. Depth matters more than completing every question.
- **Practice and Pray (10 minutes):** Commit to the weekly practice and close with the printed prayer or prayers from the group.

CREATING “A RULE OF LIFE”

Formation is a lifelong process that continues through every season of our lives. The question “*Who’s shaping your life?*” remains a faithful companion because our answers are rarely static. New seasons bring new pressures, responsibilities, and possibilities. The invitation is not to become anxious about every influence. It is to become attentive to the Spirit and intentional about the means of grace through which Christ continues to form us.

“*A Rule of Life*” is not a rigid schedule or a way to prove devotion. It is a modest, prayerful pattern that helps us remain available to grace. Choose one realistic practice in each area for the next month:

Gather in Love: A practice of Christian community, hospitality, reconciliation, or shared worship.

Grow in Faith: A practice of Scripture, prayer, Holy Communion, study, Sabbath, or spiritual conversation.

Give Back in Joyful Service: A practice of mercy, justice, generosity, care for creation, or service to a neighbor.

The person or group who will encourage me: _____

A Prayer of Dedication

Gracious God, you have made us, searched us, called us, and surrounded us with mercy. Continue your work within us. Form our attention around what is true, our anger into compassionate action, our fear into courage, our weariness into trust, our power into service, and our common life into light. By your Spirit, make us more like Christ, not for our sake alone, but for the healing of your world. Amen.

LESSON OVERVIEW

WEEK	LESSON TITLE	SCRIPTURES	SUMMARY
Week 1	Who's Shaping Your Life?	Matthew 6:19–24 Romans 12:1–2	Jesus invites us to examine the treasures, habits, and loyalties shaping our hearts and to allow God's mercy to renew our minds and reorient our lives.
Week 2	Slow to Anger	Luke 6:27–36 James 1:19–25	Jesus forms us to resist retaliation, listen before reacting, and practice a compassionate love that reflects the mercy of God.
Week 3	Fully Known	John 4:7–26, 28–29 Psalm 139:1–5, 13–14	Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman reveals that being fully known by God is not a source of shame but an invitation to truth, dignity, grace, and new life.
Week 4	Unafraid	Mark 4:35–41 Psalm 46:1–11	The storm at sea teaches us that faith does not deny fear or promise a trouble-free life but trusts the presence of Christ amid what we cannot control.
Week 5	Surrounded	John 15:9–17 Acts 2:42–47	Jesus forms us within a community of abiding love where worship, friendship, generosity, prayer, and shared life help us bear lasting fruit.
Week 6	Rested and Renewed	Matthew 11:28–30 Psalm 23	Jesus meets our weariness with a gracious invitation to receive rest, honor our limits, and learn a gentler way of carrying life with him.
Week 7	Choosing a Different Way	John 13:1–17 Philippians 2:1–11	By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus reveals a different way of using power, one shaped by humility, self-giving love, and embodied service.
Week 8	Living as Light	Matthew 5:13–16 Isaiah 58:6–12	Jesus sends us to embody a visible faith in which worship, mercy, justice, and works of repair reflect God's light for the good of the world.

WEEK 1: WHO'S SHAPING YOUR LIFE?

Primary Scripture: Matthew 6:19–24 (CEB)

Supporting Scripture: Romans 12:1–2 (CEB)

Formation Focus: Attention, allegiance, and the practices that form desire

Opening Reflection

Formation is always happening. Our calendars train us to value urgency; our spending trains us to name what matters; our screens train our attention; our repeated choices slowly become character. Jesus' question is not merely whether we possess the correct beliefs, but where our treasure, vision, and loyalty are actually directed. Matthew 6 gathers those concerns into a searching diagnosis of the heart. Paul then adds that Christian transformation involves the whole person: body, mind, worship, and discernment.

Read the Gospel

Read Matthew 6:19–24 (CEB) aloud. Before discussing interpretation, invite the group to name words, images, movements, tensions, or questions they notice.

Historical and Literary Context

Matthew 6 belongs to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus describes the life of God's kingdom. These verses form a tightly connected argument. Treasure concerns what we prize. The eye concerns how we perceive and direct attention. The two masters concern ultimate allegiance. Jesus is not offering three unrelated sayings; he is showing how desire, perception, and devotion reinforce one another. In the ancient world, wealth was vulnerable to decay and theft, making earthly security visibly fragile. Yet Jesus' deepest concern is not prudent asset management. It is the heart: what we treasure eventually organizes our love.

Biblical and Theological Commentary

The "healthy" eye can also carry the sense of generosity or singleness of purpose; the "bad" eye can suggest envy, stinginess, or distorted perception. What we repeatedly look toward affects what we are able to see. Verse 24 then exposes the impossibility of divided mastery. Money is a useful servant but a demanding lord. Jesus does not say that managing competing priorities is difficult; he says that ultimate loyalty cannot be split. Romans 12:1–2 broadens the picture. Worship is embodied, transformation resists the age's patterns, and a renewed mind learns to discern what is good. Grace initiates this work. Paul begins "because of God's mercies," but grace also trains a new way of living.

In Conversation with the Supporting Text

Matthew names the competing loyalties; Romans describes the counter-formation. We are changed as God's mercy draws our ordinary, embodied lives into worship and renews our patterns of thought. Christian formation is neither private inspiration nor sheer willpower. It is a grace-enabled reorientation practiced over time.

Now read Romans 12:1–2 (CEB) aloud. Listen for the way it confirms, deepens, or complicates the Gospel passage.

Conversation and Scripture Study

1. How do treasure, vision, and mastery relate to one another in this passage?
2. Jesus says the heart follows treasure (v. 21). How does that challenge the idea that spending simply reveals values rather than also forming them?
3. What voices or systems most actively compete to define “the good life” for us?
4. Where do you notice a gap between your stated priorities and the habits that receive your time, money, or attention?
5. Romans 12 begins with God’s mercy. Why does that matter before Paul speaks of sacrifice and transformation?
6. How can a community resist unhealthy cultural patterns without becoming fearful, self-righteous, or withdrawn?
7. What is one practice that could redirect your attention and allegiance toward God this week?

A Practice for the Week – *An Attention and Allegiance Audit*

Review one ordinary day from the past week. On paper, note where your time, attention, money, and emotional energy went. Do not judge the list at first; simply notice it. Then pray: “Merciful God, show me what is shaping me.” Choose one small, concrete adjustment that makes room for love of God and neighbor.

For Further Reflection

Read Matthew 6:1–34 as a whole. Notice how secrecy, prayer, possessions, vision, loyalty, and anxiety belong within one teaching about trust. Consider keeping Romans 12:2 before you during the week.

Closing Prayer

Merciful God, you know how easily our attention is scattered and our loyalties divided. Renew our minds, reorder our desires, and teach us to treasure what lasts. Receive our ordinary lives as worship, and form us into people who love you with undivided hearts. Amen.

Personal Notes or Commitment for the Week:

Week 2: Slow to Anger

Primary Scripture: Luke 6:27–36 (CEB)

Supporting Scripture: James 1:19–25 (CEB)

Formation Focus: Merciful love in an age of reaction

Opening Reflection

Anger can alert us that something is wrong, but it can also narrow our vision until another person becomes only an enemy, an obstacle, or an offense. Our culture rewards rapid reaction: answer immediately, assume motives, gather allies, and strike back. Jesus forms a people capable of another response. He does not ask us to deny harm or call injustice good. He commands a mercy that refuses to let hostility determine the shape of our character.

Read the Gospel

Read Luke 6:27–36 (CEB) aloud. Before discussing interpretation, invite the group to name words, images, movements, tensions, or questions they notice.

Historical and Literary Context

Luke 6:27–36 stands within Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. The teaching is addressed to those "willing to hear," signaling that discipleship requires receptive attention. "Love your enemies" is then made concrete through verbs: do good, bless, pray, give, and lend. Love here is not primarily warm feeling. It is a pattern of action grounded in the character of God, who remains kind even to the ungrateful and wicked. Jesus moves his listeners beyond reciprocity, the ordinary exchange of kindness for kindness, toward grace that does not depend on the worthiness of its recipient.

Biblical and Theological Commentary

Commands about the cheek, coat, and lending should not be used to require someone to remain in abuse or to prevent the pursuit of safety and justice. Jesus confronts retaliation and the desire to mirror an aggressor's violence; he does not sanctify exploitation. The climax is verse 36: "Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate." The disciple's pattern is God's mercy. James 1 gives this mercy a practical interior discipline: quick listening, restrained speech, and anger submitted to God's righteousness. The mirror image warns that hearing Scripture without practice produces self-deception. The word must become embodied conduct.

In Conversation with the Supporting Text

Luke gives the outward shape of enemy-love; James names the inward habits that make such love possible. Listening helps us see people more clearly. Slowness creates space between injury and response. Doing the word turns compassion from an admired ideal into a practiced way of life.

Now read James 1:19–25 (CEB) aloud. Listen for the way it confirms, deepens, or complicates the Gospel passage.

Conversation and Scripture Study

1. Which command in Luke 6 feels most difficult or disruptive to you, and why?
2. How does Jesus distinguish Kingdom love from ordinary reciprocity?
3. What is the difference between refusing retaliation and avoiding truthful confrontation or justice?
4. How can anger function as useful information without becoming our master?
5. Why might listening be a form of spiritual discipline rather than merely a communication technique?
6. What does James mean when he says human anger does not produce God's righteousness?
7. Where are Christian communities tempted to hear Jesus' teaching without putting it into practice?
8. Think of a strained relationship. What would one faithful action: prayer, blessing, boundary, listening, or repair look like this week?

A Practice for the Week – *The Holy Pause*

When irritation rises this week, pause before speaking or sending. Take three slow breaths. Ask: What am I feeling? What good am I seeking? What response reflects both truth and mercy? If safety is at stake, seek help and establish a wise boundary. Otherwise, choose one response that refuses contempt.

For Further Reflection

Read Luke 6:20–49 and trace the movement from blessing and woe to enemy-love, judging, fruit, and foundations. Read James 1:19–27 and notice how speech, action, and care for vulnerable people define practiced religion.

Closing Prayer

Compassionate God, slow our anger and deepen our listening. Keep us from returning harm for harm. Give us courage to tell the truth, wisdom to set faithful boundaries, and grace to seek the good even of those we find difficult to love. Make us doers of your word. Amen.

Personal Notes or Commitment for the Week:

WEEK 3: FULLY KNOWN

Primary Scripture: John 4:7–26, 28–29 (CEB)

Supporting Scripture: Psalm 139:1–5, 13–14 (NRSV)

Formation Focus: Truthful encounter, dignity, and transforming grace

Opening Reflection

Most of us want to be known, but not exposed; welcomed, but not examined. We manage what others see because we fear that full knowledge might lead to rejection. At Jacob's well, Jesus crosses boundaries of ethnicity, gender, religious history, and social expectation to begin a conversation with a Samaritan woman. He neither reduces her to her past nor avoids the truth of her life. In his presence, being fully known becomes the doorway to living water and witness.

Read the Gospel

Read John 4:7–26, 28–29 (CEB) aloud. Before discussing interpretation, invite the group to name words, images, movements, tensions, or questions they notice.

Historical and Literary Context

The encounter takes place in Samaria, amid a long history of conflict between Jews and Samaritans over ancestry, Scripture, and the proper place of worship. A Jewish man publicly requesting water from a Samaritan woman unsettles several social boundaries at once. John also sets the scene at Jacob's well, a place dense with ancestral memory. The conversation moves through misunderstanding toward revelation: ordinary water to living water, personal history to truthful worship, and finally Jesus' disclosure of his identity.

Biblical and Theological Commentary

This passage has often been read as though the woman were simply being exposed for sexual immorality. The text does not explain why she had five husbands. Death, abandonment, divorce, or economic vulnerability are all possible within a world where women had limited power. Jesus states the truth but offers no word of condemnation. More importantly, she becomes a serious theological conversation partner. She asks about worship, recognizes Jesus as a prophet, receives his self-revelation, and becomes a witness to her community. Her abandoned water jar signals an interruption of purpose: she came for water and leaves carrying news. Psalm 139 names the theological ground of the encounter. God's searching knowledge is intimate and creative, not merely investigative. The One who knows also forms and surrounds.

In Conversation with the Supporting Text

John shows what Psalm 139 confesses: divine knowledge reaches the whole person. Yet God's knowing does not erase dignity; it restores truthful relationship. Grace is not pretending that our lives are simple. Grace is being seen without being reduced to our failures, wounds, labels, or social location.

Now read Psalm 139:1–5, 13–14 (NRSV) aloud. Listen for the way it confirms, deepens, or complicates the Gospel passage.

Conversation and Scripture Study

1. What boundaries does Jesus cross simply by beginning this conversation?
2. How does the woman's understanding of Jesus develop through the passage?
3. What assumptions about the woman are commonly imported into the story but not stated by the text?
4. How does Jesus hold truth and dignity together in verses 16–18?
5. Why does the conversation turn from personal history to worship?
6. What do you make of the woman leaving her water jar and speaking to the city?
7. How does Psalm 139 change the emotional meaning of being “searched” and known by God?
8. Where might Christ be inviting you to move from hiding or self-protection toward truthful freedom?

A Practice for the Week – *Known Without Hiding*

Set aside ten quiet minutes. Pray Psalm 139:1–5 slowly. Name one part of your life you tend to conceal from God, from yourself, or from trusted community. Without explaining it away, place it before Christ. End by repeating: “I am fully known, and grace still meets me here.”

For Further Reflection

Read all of John 4:1–42. Compare the woman's witness (“Come and see”) with the disciples' concern about food. Notice who recognizes the harvest. You may also read Genesis 16:7–14, another story of a marginalized woman encountered by the God who sees.

Closing Prayer

God who searches and knows us, free us from hiding. Meet us with truth that heals and grace that restores. Teach us to see others as whole persons, never reducing them to a history, label, or wound. Let the living water of Christ rise within us and overflow in witness. Amen.

Personal Notes or Commitment for the Week:

WEEK 4: UNAFRAID

Primary Scripture: Mark 4:35–41 (CEB)

Supporting Scripture: Psalm 46:1–11 (NRSV)

Formation Focus: Faithful presence when fear is real

Opening Reflection

Fear is a necessary human response to danger, but it is a poor architect for a life. It can protect us in a crisis and still distort our decisions when it becomes chronic. Mark does not offer disciples a storm-free existence. The boat is swamped, experienced fishermen are terrified, and Jesus appears asleep. The story asks a more demanding question than “How do we avoid fear?” It asks who we trust, and who we are becoming, when fear has evidence on its side.

Read the Gospel

Read Mark 4:35–41 (CEB) aloud. Before discussing interpretation, invite the group to name words, images, movements, tensions, or questions they notice.

Historical and Literary Context

Mark situates the crossing after a day of teaching in parables. Jesus initiates the journey “to the other side,” toward Gentile territory. The Sea of Galilee was known for sudden storms, but Biblical imagery also associated the sea with chaos beyond human control. The disciples’ question, “Don’t you care?” is therefore both practical and theological. Their danger leads them to interpret Jesus’ apparent silence as indifference. When Jesus commands wind and water, Mark uses the language of rebuke, portraying authority over forces the disciples cannot master.

Biblical and Theological Commentary

Jesus’ question about fear and faith should not be read as shaming a normal stress response. In Mark, faith is not denial of the storm; it is growing trust in the One present within it. The story ends not with easy relief but with deeper awe: the disciples fear the storm, then confront the unsettling mystery of Jesus’ identity. “Who then is this?” is the passage’s central Christological question. Psalm 46 offers a communal counterpart. Earth changes, waters roar, nations rage and still God is “very present.” “Be still” in verse 10 is not merely advice for private relaxation; in context it is a divine command amid geopolitical upheaval: cease striving and recognize God’s sovereignty.

In Conversation with the Supporting Text

Both texts speak honestly about destabilizing forces. Neither promises that faithful people will be spared them. Their confidence rests in presence: Christ in the boat, God in the midst of the city. Courage is not the absence of bodily fear but the refusal to let fear have the final word.

Now read Psalm 46:1–11 (NRSV) aloud. Listen for the way it confirms, deepens, or complicates the Gospel passage.

Conversation and Scripture Study

1. What details make the danger in Mark 4 feel immediate and credible?
2. Why do you think the disciples interpret Jesus' sleep as a lack of care?
3. When have circumstances tempted you to equate God's silence with God's absence?
4. How is faith different from optimism, control, or emotional calm?
5. Why does the story end with the disciples asking about Jesus rather than simply celebrating the calm?
6. What changes when Psalm 46:10 is read in the context of verses 1–9?
7. How can a congregation become a steadying presence for people living with fear or trauma?
8. What fear needs to be acknowledged honestly and placed within the larger truth of God's presence this week?

A Practice for the Week – *Name, Ground, Trust*

When fear rises, name it specifically: "I am afraid that..." Ground yourself by noticing five things you see, four you feel, and three you hear. Then pray: "Christ, you are present with me." Choose the next faithful action available to you. This practice is not a substitute for professional care when anxiety is persistent or overwhelming, but it can help us become more grounded and aware of Christ's presence in moments of fear.

For Further Reflection

Read Mark 4:1–5:20 and notice how Jesus' authority unfolds over teaching, nature, and destructive spiritual forces. Read Psalm 46 aloud three times, pausing after each "Selah."

Closing Prayer

God our refuge, meet us in the storms we cannot control. When fear narrows our vision, remind us that we are not alone. Give us wisdom for the next faithful step, compassion for frightened neighbors, and courage rooted in the presence of Christ. Amen.

Personal Notes or Commitment for the Week:

WEEK 5: SURROUNDED

Primary Scripture: John 15:9–17 (CEB)

Supporting Scripture: Acts 2:42–47 (CEB)

Formation Focus: Abiding love and the community that forms us

Opening Reflection

Modern life often imagines the self as an independent project: choose your identity, manage your image, build your network, and solve your problems. The New Testament offers a more relational picture. Jesus forms disciples within a communion of love. We do not become faithful alone. We are surrounded by practices, stories, tables, friendships, and responsibilities through which Christ's love takes durable shape.

Read the Gospel

Read John 15:9–17 (CEB) aloud. Before discussing interpretation, invite the group to name words, images, movements, tensions, or questions they notice.

Historical and Literary Context

John 15 belongs to Jesus' Farewell Discourse on the night before his death. The language of love and friendship is therefore spoken under the shadow of the cross. "Remain" or "abide" is one of John's central verbs; it describes an ongoing dwelling rather than a passing religious experience. Jesus' command to love is grounded in a prior reality: "As the Father loved me, I too have loved you." Christian community begins with received love, not manufactured affection.

Biblical and Theological Commentary

Obedience in John 15 is not a transaction by which disciples earn love. The order runs the other way: they are loved, chosen, and then appointed to bear lasting fruit. Friendship with Jesus is not casual familiarity; it includes shared knowledge, costly love, and participation in his mission. Acts 2:42–47 shows this relational theology embodied in communal practices: apostolic teaching, fellowship, shared meals, prayer, generosity, worship, and public goodwill. The description is not a romantic claim that the Early Church had no conflict; Acts soon records serious tensions. It is a theological portrait of the habits by which the Spirit forms a people.

In Conversation with the Supporting Text

John names the source and command of Christian community; Acts displays its practices. Abiding love becomes visible through attention, shared resources, table fellowship, prayer, and care. Community is more than proximity. It is a grace-shaped ecology in which people learn to receive love and give themselves for others.

Now read Acts 2:42–47 (CEB) aloud. Listen for the way it confirms, deepens, or complicates the Gospel passage.

Conversation and Scripture Study

1. What does the repeated word “remain” suggest about the kind of relationship Jesus desires?
2. How does the timing of this teaching on the eve of the cross shape the meaning of love and friendship?
3. What is the theological significance of Jesus saying “I chose you” before speaking of fruit?
4. Which practices in Acts 2 are inward-facing, and which turn the community outward?
5. What is attractive about Acts 2:42–47? What is challenging or easy to idealize?
6. How do communities form us for good or ill, even when we are unaware of their influence?
7. Who has surrounded you with the kind of love that helped you grow in faith?
8. What practice could help your group become a more truthful, generous, and welcoming community?

A Practice for the Week – *Strengthen the Circle*

Identify one person in your community who may be overlooked, isolated, or carrying more than others realize. Make a concrete gesture of presence: invite them to a meal, call and listen, offer practical help, or include them in prayer. Let the action arise from love, not from a need to fix or manage them.

For Further Reflection

Read John 13:1–17 and 15:1–17 together, noting the relationship among service, abiding, commandment, joy, and fruit. Read Acts 2:37–47 and ask what precedes the communal practices described.

Closing Prayer

God of communion, thank you for loving and choosing us in Christ. Root us in that love. Make our fellowship deeper than friendliness and our service more than obligation. Teach us to share life, prayer, resources, truth, and joy so that our common life bears lasting fruit. Amen.

Personal Notes or Commitment for the Week:

WEEK 6: RESTED AND RENEWED

Primary Scripture: Matthew 11:28–30 (CEB)

Supporting Scripture: Psalm 23 (KJV)

Formation Focus: The easy yoke and the grace of creaturely limits

Opening Reflection

Exhaustion is often treated as a private failure of time management. Yet weariness can also be produced by grief, caregiving, illness, economic pressure, injustice, unrealistic expectations, and cultures that equate worth with output. Jesus does not address the weary with another demand to become more efficient. He offers himself: “Come to me.” The rest he gives is not escape from discipleship but a new way of carrying life with him.

Read the Gospel

Read Matthew 11:28–30 (CEB) aloud. Before discussing interpretation, invite the group to name words, images, movements, tensions, or questions they notice.

Historical and Literary Context

Matthew 11 holds both resistance and revelation. Jesus has lamented communities that refuse to respond, then praises the Father for revealing truth to “little children.” His invitation to the burdened follows immediately. A yoke was a wooden instrument for shared labor and a common metaphor for instruction or a way of life. Jesus does not promise no yoke at all; he contrasts crushing burdens with apprenticeship to one who is gentle and humble in heart.

Biblical and Theological Commentary

The Greek word translated “easy” can carry the sense of kind, good, or well-fitting. Jesus’ yoke is not effortless, but it is congruent with grace and shared with a trustworthy teacher. “Rest for your souls” echoes Jeremiah 6:16, where God’s people are invited to walk in the good way. Psalm 23 supplies the imaginative world of such rest: provision, green pasture, still water, right paths, presence in the valley, a prepared table, and a dwelling secured by goodness and mercy. The Shepherd’s care does not eliminate the valley. It makes faithful passage possible.

In Conversation with the Supporting Text

Matthew frames rest as relationship and apprenticeship; Psalm 23 pictures the Shepherd who provides and accompanies. Biblical rest is not laziness, passivity, or reward after worthiness. It is trustful participation in God’s care, an acknowledgment that we are creatures rather than machines.

Now read Psalm 23 (KJV) aloud. Listen for the way it confirms, deepens, or complicates the Gospel passage.

Conversation and Scripture Study

1. What kinds of burdens might Jesus' first hearers have carried? Which burdens feel familiar today?
2. Why does Jesus invite the weary to take a yoke rather than simply put every responsibility down?
3. How does Jesus' character, gentle and humble in heart, shape our understanding of his authority?
4. What is the difference between rest as escape and rest as renewal?
5. Which image in Psalm 23 speaks most directly to your present season?
6. How can churches unintentionally add religious burdens to already weary people?
7. What cultural stories connect worth with productivity, and how does the Gospel challenge them?
8. What limit do you need to honor, and what burden might be carried differently with Christ and community?

A Practice for the Week – *Receive Rest as Grace*

Choose a protected period of at least thirty minutes this week in which you will not produce, purchase, or perform. Walk slowly, sit outdoors, enjoy music, or share an unhurried meal. Begin with Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11:28. Notice any guilt that arises, and answer it with this truth: rest is received, not earned.

For Further Reflection

Read Matthew 11:25–12:14, following the theme of burden and Sabbath into the next chapter. Pray Psalm 23 daily, emphasizing a different phrase each time.

Closing Prayer

Gentle Christ, we come carrying burdens we can name and burdens we barely understand. Teach us your unforced way of grace. Lead us beside still waters, restore our souls, and help us honor the limits through which we receive life as gift. Amen.

Personal Notes or Commitment for the Week:

WEEK 7: CHOOSING A DIFFERENT WAY

Primary Scripture: John 13:1–17 (CEB)

Supporting Scripture: Philippians 2:1–11 (CEB)

Formation Focus: Power reshaped through humble, embodied service

Opening Reflection

We are formed by the models of power we admire. Some versions of leadership depend on visibility, control, status, or being served. On the final night before the cross, Jesus places a towel around his waist and performs the work of a household servant. This is more than an object lesson in being helpful. It is a revelation of who Jesus is and what divine power looks like when translated into human relationships.

Read the Gospel

Read John 13:1–17 (CEB) aloud. Before discussing interpretation, invite the group to name words, images, movements, tensions, or questions they notice.

Historical and Literary Context

Footwashing was necessary hospitality in a dusty environment, normally assigned to a person of low status. John emphasizes that Jesus acts with full knowledge of his origin, destiny, authority, and Judas's betrayal. He does not serve because he has forgotten who he is; he serves because he knows. Peter's protest exposes the scandal: a Lord should not occupy a servant's place. Jesus' answer shows that disciples must first receive his service before they can imitate it.

Biblical and Theological Commentary

The sequence matters. Jesus "loved them to the end," washes their feet, and then gives an example. Christian service is response before it is achievement. It also does not mean erasing boundaries, enabling harm, or using self-neglect as proof of holiness. Jesus remains free, purposeful, and truthful, even toward betrayal. Philippians 2 places the same pattern within the life of the church. Paul appeals for unity by pointing to Christ's self-emptying. The Greek term often discussed as *kenosis* does not mean that Christ ceased to be divine; it describes the self-giving shape of divine love. The movement downward toward servanthood and death is answered by God's exaltation.

In Conversation with the Supporting Text

John gives us the basin and towel; Philippians gives the theological hymn. Together they show that humility is not thinking less of human dignity but refusing to use power for self-exaltation. The way of Christ converts privilege into responsibility and authority into service.

Now read Philippians 2:1–11 (CEB) aloud. Listen for the way it confirms, deepens, or complicates the Gospel passage.

Conversation and Scripture Study

1. What does John emphasize that Jesus knows before he washes the disciples' feet? Why does that matter?
2. Why does Peter resist being served, and where do you recognize that resistance in yourself?
3. How is receiving grace a necessary first step before faithful service?
4. What is the difference between Christlike humility and low self-worth or self-erasure?
5. How does Philippians 2 redefine power, status, and glory?
6. Where can "servant leadership" language be misused to demand unhealthy sacrifice from people with less power?
7. Whose labor is easy for you to overlook or take for granted?
8. What privilege, authority, expertise, or access could you place in service of another this week?

A Practice for the Week – *Take the Towel*

Choose one act of service that is useful, specific, and unlikely to bring recognition. If possible, do a task that is often left to someone with less status or visibility. Before acting, ask what the person actually needs; service listens rather than assumes. Afterward, resist the impulse to advertise the act.

For Further Reflection

Read John 13:1–35 and notice how washing, betrayal, glory, and the new commandment are woven together. Read Philippians 2:1–18, tracing the movement from Christ's pattern to the community's shared life.

Closing Prayer

Servant Christ, you meet us with grace before asking anything from us. Wash away our pride and our fear of receiving. Reshape our use of power. Give us the mind of Christ, that we may serve with humility, truth, freedom, and joy. Amen.

Personal Notes or Commitment for the Week:

WEEK 8: LIVING AS LIGHT

Primary Scripture: Matthew 5:13–16 (CEB)

Supporting Scripture: Isaiah 58:6–12 (CEB)

Formation Focus: Visible holiness for the good of the world

Opening Reflection

Formation is never only private. Over time, what shapes the heart becomes visible in relationships, institutions, neighborhoods, and public life. Jesus calls his disciples salt and light, not as a compliment to enjoy, but as a vocation to inhabit. Salt matters by entering what it preserves and seasons. Light matters by illuminating a space beyond itself. A church formed by Christ does not exist for its own brightness; it reflects God's goodness so neighbors can flourish.

Read the Gospel

Read Matthew 5:13–16 (CEB) aloud. Before discussing interpretation, invite the group to name words, images, movements, tensions, or questions they notice.

Historical and Literary Context

These images appear near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, immediately after the Beatitudes. Jesus speaks to a community described as poor in spirit, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking, and sometimes persecuted. "You" is plural: the vocation belongs to the community. In an age without electric light, a lamp on a stand could affect an entire household. A city on a hill could be seen from a distance. Discipleship has an unavoidable social visibility.

Biblical and Theological Commentary

Salt in the ancient world preserved food, enhanced flavor, and carried covenantal associations. The precise image may be debated, but Jesus' warning is clear: disciples can fail to embody their purpose. Light likewise is not self-generated moral brilliance. The good works become visible so that others glorify the Father, not the disciples. Isaiah 58 guards this witness from becoming superficial. The prophet confronts fasting that coexists with exploitation and quarrelling. Worship acceptable to God loosens injustice, shares bread, houses the unhoused, and attends to one's own kin. Then, Isaiah says, light breaks forth and ruins are rebuilt.

In Conversation with the Supporting Text

Matthew gives the identity and vocation; Isaiah gives its ethical substance. Light is credible when worship and justice belong together. Good works are not a strategy for earning salvation or polishing the church's reputation. They are the public fruit of grace and a sign of God's healing purpose.

Now read Isaiah 58:6–12 (CEB) aloud. Listen for the way it confirms, deepens, or complicates the Gospel passage.

Conversation and Scripture Study

1. How does the placement after the Beatitudes shape the meaning of salt and light?
2. What changes when we hear “you are” as plural rather than merely individual?
3. What purposes of salt help illuminate Jesus’ metaphor? Where should we avoid overclaiming?
4. How can good works remain visible without becoming performative?
5. What disconnect between worship and daily ethics does Isaiah 58 expose?
6. Why does Isaiah connect care for vulnerable neighbors with repair and restoration?
7. Where does our community most need faithful illumination rather than condemnation?
8. Looking back over the series, what has most clearly named the person or community Christ is forming us to become?

A Practice for the Week – *One Work of Repair*

Notice one place in your neighborhood, workplace, church, or civic life where something is frayed. Take one concrete step toward repair: share food, address an unjust practice, encourage a weary worker, welcome someone excluded, conserve a common resource, or support a trusted ministry. Let the act point beyond you toward God’s love.

For Further Reflection

Read Matthew 5:1–20 as a unified portrait of Kingdom identity. Read Isaiah 58 in full, observing the movement from false worship to justice, healing, guidance, and restored community.

Closing Prayer

God of light, complete the work you have begun among us. Make our worship truthful, our mercy practical, and our witness humble. Send us into the world as salt that serves and light that reveals your love. May our common life help repair what is broken and give glory to you. Amen.

Personal Notes or Commitment for the Week:



A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY INVITING *all*
TO GATHER *in love* GROW *in faith* GIVE BACK *in joy*

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