

2026-10-11 Small Group Guide

Small Group Guide

"Straining at the Oars: Rest, Character, and Trust in God"

Based on Mark 6:30-56, Matthew 14:22-33, John 6:16-21

Before You Begin

Open your time together in prayer, asking God to speak to each person individually and to the group collectively. Encourage members to bring their honest thoughts and struggles to the conversation -- this is a safe place to be real.

Key Takeaways from the Sermon

1. Rest is not weakness -- it is wisdom. Jesus recognized when his disciples needed rest and directed them toward it. Physical and spiritual fatigue affects our character, our relationships, and our ability to serve.
2. Jesus prayed even when he did not have to. If the Son of God withdrew regularly to solitary places to pray, how much more do we need that discipline in our own lives? Prayer is not a last resort -- it is a first response.
3. God sometimes lets us strain at the oars. Struggle is not always a sign that God has abandoned us. Often it is the very tool he uses to build our character, deepen our faith, and prepare us for greater usefulness.
4. Our primary calling mirrors Christ's primary ministry. Jesus was above all a teacher who made disciples. Feeding, healing, and other acts of compassion supported that mission but did not replace it. We are called to do the same.
5. Changed people change people. The transformation God works in us on the inside is what draws others toward him. Joy, peace, and Christlike character are more powerful witnesses than words alone.
6. Feelings are deceptive -- character is built through obedience. Like Abraham walking up the mountain, we are called to trust and obey even

when our feelings push us in the opposite direction.

Discussion Questions

Opening Up

These questions are meant to help the group ease into the topic and connect personally before going deeper.

The pastor opened with a lighthearted illustration about naps. When was the last time you were genuinely spiritually or emotionally exhausted and did not realize it until later? What were the signs?

On a scale of one to ten, how would you honestly rate your level of joy and contentment this past week? What was driving that number?

Going Deeper

These questions engage directly with the sermon content and Scripture.

Jesus sent the disciples ahead in the boat while he went to pray alone on the mountain. Why do you think he chose to pray rather than rest, even after an exhausting day? What does that say about the relationship between prayer and renewal?

The pastor pointed out that Jesus watched the disciples strain at the oars and did not immediately intervene. What does that reveal about how God sometimes works in our lives? How do you typically respond when God seems slow to step in?

The sermon drew a distinction between Jesus as a teacher first and a miracle worker second. How does that reframe the way you think about your own witness and ministry to others? Does your life currently reflect that priority?

The pastor said that "feelings are deceptive" and referenced the example of Abraham obeying God even when every step must have felt impossibly heavy. Can you think of a time when obeying God felt hard but led to growth

or breakthrough? What carried you through?

When Jesus walked on the water and identified himself, he said "It is I" -- language the pastor connected to God's name "I AM." Why is it significant that Jesus chose those words in a moment of fear and chaos? How does knowing who Jesus is change how you face your own storms?

The pastor challenged the group to honestly assess their character development in Christ. If you were to draw a growth chart of your spiritual life over the last year, what would it look like? Where do you see the most room for growth?

Getting Honest

These questions invite personal reflection and vulnerability.

The pastor mentioned that many Christians are afraid to share their faith, and suggested it may be because they do not know Jesus well enough yet. Do you identify with that? What would it look like for you to know him better?

Are you currently cranking at the oars in some area of your life -- working hard but not making headway? Have you brought that specific struggle to God in prayer, or have you mostly tried to muscle through it on your own?

The pastor described how easy it is to become grumpy, fussy, and hard to be around when we are spiritually depleted. Who in your life might be affected by your spiritual fatigue right now? What is one step you could take this week to address that?

Practical Applications

Choose one or two of these to commit to before your group meets again.

Practice intentional rest. Identify one area of your life where you are running on empty. This week, carve out intentional time -- whether sleep, silence, or solitude -- and bring that space before God rather than filling it with noise or

distraction.

Establish a daily prayer rhythm. If Jesus withdrew regularly to pray, build that same habit into your week. Start small -- even ten to fifteen minutes of honest, unhurried conversation with God each morning. Ask him specifically, "How do I see you today? Where do I need to grow?"

Do a character audit. Take time this week to journal honestly about one area of your character that needs development. Ask God to show you what straining at the oars in that area might look like, and what obedience would require of you.

Replace complaining with gratitude. For the next seven days, every time you feel the urge to complain -- out loud or internally -- pause and name one thing you are genuinely grateful for instead. Notice how it shifts your perspective.

Identify someone to serve. The pastor challenged us to wake up asking, "God, how can I serve you and others today?" Choose one specific person this week -- at work, in your neighborhood, or in this group -- and do something intentional to serve them without expecting anything in return.

Revisit your witness. Reflect honestly on whether the people around you would be drawn to Christ by watching your daily life. Ask a trusted friend or family member for honest feedback about what they observe in you.

Closing Prayer

Close your group time by praying together. You may want to pray through the following themes:

Gratitude that God wants us and invites us to come to him

Honesty about areas of grumpiness, fatigue, or spiritual stagnation

Surrender of personal goals and timelines to God's plan

Courage to trust God in the middle of the straining seasons

A renewed desire to know Christ more deeply and make him known

Memory Verse for the Week

Matthew 11:28-29 -- Jesus extends an invitation to those who are weary and burdened, promising rest and a partnership with him that is gentle and fits well.

Write it out. Memorize it. Bring it back next week and share what it meant to you.

"Changed people change people. But it is not just changing your shirt and your pants. It is changing you on the inside and from the inside out." -- From this week's sermon