



3

ways to

PRAY

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3 Ways to Pray

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Measure the Clouds Ministries

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What is Prayer?

The Bible tells us that Jesus frequently sought solitude for prayer. He wanted time alone with his Father, and his disciples, those closest to him, were intrigued by his practice. He did not pray like other rabbis of his day. So they asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). The prayer Jesus taught them has been embraced by Christians throughout history. The Lord’s Prayer is far more than a list of requests offered up to God; it is the pattern of a life in communion *with* him.

For many people prayer is seen primarily as a form of *communication*—the way we talk to God. In some traditions it is believed that God may even speak to us in prayer. But in both cases prayer has a definition limited to communication, and while that is certainly part of prayer, it does not capture the entirety of what Jesus or his Apostle say about it.

Jesus’ did not experience his Father’s presence merely in his times of solitude or while speaking to him, but also during his hours healing, teaching, and serving others. He spoke of his utter dependence upon his Father: “the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” (John 5:19). And Jesus repeatedly speaks of dwelling with the Father in present unity: “The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that

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I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:10-11).

While Jesus certainly prayed vocally both in private and public, these utterances did not encompass the fullness of his relationship with his Father. A fuller reading of the Gospels show that Jesus lived in constant *communion* with the Father even when no words were used. For Jesus, prayer was not simply a way of sending and receiving messages from his Father, but a way of being with him.

Imagine standing on a shore while God resides on another. Between you and him is a great expanse. If we think of prayer as communication, then we must find some way of passing messages from our shore to God’s. Through some device we might pass a signal from our shore to his, but we will remain apart. The divide itself is never overcome.

The sort of prayer Jesus and his followers practiced, however, was different. It was more like a bridge that crosses time and space, it spans heaven and earth, to connect us to our heavenly Father. Messages are still sent and received, but the bridge is intended to connect more than our words and ideas. It is there for God and his children to travel to one another and abide with each other even when no words are spoken. This fuller understanding of prayer is often perplexing to those who have only known prayer as communication.

For example, in the 1980s Dan Rather interviewed Mother Teresa. The CBS anchor asked her, “When you pray what do you say to God?”

“I don’t say anything,” she replied. “I listen.”

“Okay,” Rather took another shot at it. “When God speaks to you,

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then, what does he say?”

“He doesn’t say anything. He listens.”

Rather didn’t know how to continue. He was baffled.

“And if you don’t understand that,” Mother Teresa added, “I can’t explain it to you.”

Understanding prayer as communion with God is what Paul had in mind when he commanded Christians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Paul is calling us to live as Jesus did—in constant connection with God even when no words are exchanged. This is only possible by the presence of God’s Spirit within us.

In John 14, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to his people. “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:20). In the same discourse he invites us to “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches” (John 15:4-5). This call to dwell or abide is an ongoing state of being, not an invitation to chat once in a while. We are invited to live in ongoing communion with God. But how? What does this kind of prayer look like?

There are an abundance of resources spanning the history of Christianity to aid us in treasuring and communing with Christ. (Some are listed at the end of this guide.) But for those looking for an accessible start, here I’ve included three forms of prayer that can help move us from merely *communicating* with God toward richly *communing* with him.

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Each of these practices has proven useful in my own spiritual development, and I offer them not as a prescription but merely a recommendation. Remember, a spiritual practice is to be grasped loosely. They are each a *means* by which we commune with God and should never be seen as an end in themselves. Additionally, no practice comes with a guaranteed outcome, and over time if you find a practice is not fostering your communion with God, modify or exchange it for another. This is best done in consultation with a trusted friend or mentor who can help you discern when a practice should be abandoned and when persevering may be best.

1

Praying with the Scriptures

Prior to the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the 15th century, most Christians had little or no direct access to the Bible. And even after it was widely distributed most were not literate enough to read it. This means that throughout most of history followers of Christ have engaged Scripture very differently than we do. Modern people tend to approach the Bible as a manual or text book—a document to be dissected, mastered, parsed, and implemented. In a manner of speaking, we stand

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over the text deciding what parts to read, when to read, and how to respond.

While the intellectual study of Scripture is certainly a good practice and one more Christians ought to engage, there is another pre-Enlightenment method of reading the Bible that is also worth practicing. *Lectio divina* (divine reading) approaches the Scriptures not as a depository of principles and applications, but as the self-revelation of God to his people. It sees the Bible is the Living Word of God through which he still speaks and communes with us.

The practice originated in the centuries before the printing press when Christians would gather daily at the church or cathedral for the public reading of Scripture. Rather than visually reading text on the page in silence as we do, they received the word audibly as it was read aloud—a model for engaging God’s word as ancient as the Scriptures themselves. Having received and meditated on the Word of God, they disbanded as each person engaged his or her work for the day. But an individual would retain a word, phrase, or sentence from the Bible reading to foster their communion with God in prayer throughout the day. Eventually this practice was taught in five movements.

- 1) **Reading.** Gently read the passage of scripture aloud being mindful of each word and phrase. The goal is not to read large quantities of Scripture, but to engage it reflectively and with an awareness of God’s

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presence. This may mean reading the text multiple times. Eventually identify a word or short phrase that speaks to you in some manner.

- 2) **Meditating.** Having read the Scriptures, in the second movement allow the Scriptures to read you. Use the passage or phrase to guide your time of reflection and self-examination. How does the reading apply to you and your circumstances? Invite God to speak and reveal what he desires to impart to you through the text.
- 3) **Speaking.** After allowing God and his Scriptures to have the first word, it is now time for you to respond. Communicate your thoughts to God with words. This may be gratitude, confession, worry, joy, or any number of emotions that result from engaging the Scriptures.
- 4) **Contemplating.** When speaking ceases, it is time to rest in God's presence. Use the remainder of the time to be silent and open to what God has to say. Receive his forgiveness, assurance, or whatever he may have for you.
- 5) **Ruminating.** As you conclude your time, take the special word or phrase from the reading with you. Throughout the day return to it as a prompt for prayer and as a reminder of God's presence with you.

I found the practice of divine reading particularly helpful while in seminary. The Bible had literally become my textbook, and it was difficult to read it without slipping into an academic posture. But this ancient method of engaging Scripture allowed me to once again commune with God through his Word.

2

Praying with the Church

The ancient Israelites set aside regular times, or “offices,” for prayer in the morning, midday, and evening utilizing the Psalms as their prayer book. Daniel exhibits this routine while a captive in Babylon, and it’s what lands him in the lion’s den (Daniel 6). The tradition continued into the New Testament among Jewish Christians and later became common throughout the Church.

Eventually books of Christian prayers were compiled. (The most popular among Protestants being *The Book of Common Prayer*.) These prayer books included readings from the Psalms, the Old Testament, the Epistles, and the Gospels for each day along with prayers for morning, midday, and evening. The prayers and readings were organized around the seasons of the church calendar. This meant Christians dispersed throughout the world were nonetheless united in their reading of Scripture and prayers each day.

I have found three advantages in using a prayer book and observing the offices three times a day. First, it has been a helpful step toward Paul’s admonition to “pray without ceasing.” It is so easy for the tasks of the day to rush at us like wild animals, and in a matter of seconds

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we are swept up in the stampede. By stopping at regular intervals in my day, putting aside my other tasks, and spending a few minutes in Scripture and prayer, I recalibrate my mind and soul toward God rather than the things of this world.

Secondly, using the church's calendar and historic prayers reminds me that I cannot isolate my union with God from my union with his people. The writer of Hebrews speaks of the faithful who have preceded us as "a great cloud of witnesses" cheering us on from the stands. Using a tool like *The Book of Common Prayer* reminds me of my brothers and sisters who have prayed these same words for centuries before me. We are all connected—one household of faith, with the same God and Father of all. Likewise, I also know that Christians throughout the world are praying and reflecting on the same words each day. This thought lifts me from the individualism that plagues our culture and many expressions of Christianity.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, using a prayer book teaches me how to pray. Some Christians criticize written prayers as inauthentic because they are not spontaneously composed in the mind of the person praying. But when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he offered them a pre-formed set of phrases—the Lord's Prayer. This wasn't because Jesus did not value authenticity or heart-felt prayers, but because he knew his followers needed more guidance. The Lord's Prayer is like the framing of a house. It provides the basic outline and structure for how to think about God and commune with him. Without the Lord's Prayer it's unlikely any

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of Jesus' Jewish followers would have thought to address God as "Our Father." Likewise, I am unlikely to reflect on, let alone confess, sins of omission were it not for this line from a daily prayer: "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone."

Written prayers guide us in our thoughts, and often teach us rich theological truths in the process. But we are still invited to adorn their framing with both the decor and decay of our lives. Rather than speedily reading over a prayer like some kind of incantation, we should allow the words to provoke our own reflections and words.

If using written prayers three times a day seems too daunting or uncomfortable, I suggest starting more simply. For example, many Christians pray before meals, and even those who shun written prayers as repetitious tend to revert back to the same clichés at the dinner table themselves. Why not use a historic written prayer, one used by Christians for centuries, to thank God for his provision? Or, if you have a hectic household in the morning, gather everyone together and read this prayer before you each depart for the day:

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you, wherever he may send you; may he guide you through the wilderness, and protect you through the storm, may he bring you home rejoicing, at the wonders he has shown you, may he bring you home rejoicing, once again through our doors.

Sure beats, "Have a nice day, kids," doesn't it?

3

Praying with the Spirit

Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” In our busy, information-overloaded culture it is increasingly difficult to pause for self-examination. God may be present in our lives, but given the pace at which we move it’s entirely possible that we do not notice him. This is what the practice of examen was developed to remedy. It is a tool for both self-examination and a growing awareness of God’s presence with us.

For centuries Christians have set aside a time to reflect on the events, encounters, and feelings that have filled their day. With intention they would replay the previous hours and ask themselves questions to uncover the hidden movements of God that might otherwise go unnoticed. The practice of examine often makes the most sense at the close of the day, although I know some who begin each morning with the discipline in anticipation of the events ahead.

I suggest beginning by reviewing your calendar to bring to mind the events and activities of your completed day. As you reflect back, ask God’s Spirit to reveal how he was present in each task or encounter. Where were you aware of his presence, and when were you not? How might a particular activity have been different if you’d been aware of God

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being with you? Over time this practice of reflection and daily examination will help you be more aware of God's presence *during* the day and not simply at the close of it.

One “filter” to examine your day through involves looking for moments of what Ignatius Loyola called “consolation”—times of moving toward God. The opposite is “desolation”—times of moving away from God. What activities or moments drew you closer to God or sparked an awareness of his presence. And are there activities that regularly distract you from any sense of God? Being more aware of both of these movements can help us live with greater intentionality and aid us in developing a continual communion with him.

The practice of examen sometimes uses a series of question to uncover the deeper feelings we accumulate during the day. For example as you playback the events of the day like a video in your mind ask yourself, “Where was I most _____ today?” (Fill in the blank with “alive,” “peaceful,” “loved,” “sad,” “grateful,” etc.). Allow these questions to prompt prayers of thanksgiving, confession, or petition.

A struggle many people have with this practice is honesty. Very often we will think back to a conversation or event from the day and dwell upon how we *should* have acted or what we *ought* to have said. The goal of the examen is not to reflect on what could, should, or ought to have happened, but rather to be honest with oneself, with the Holy Spirit's help, about what *did* happen how you *actually* felt. At times this will prompt

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confession of sin, but it is also an opportunity for self-examination and for God to reveal the truth about yourself.

In a very basic form we also practice this discipline with our children at the dinner table. We usually go around and share our “high and low”—the high point and low point of our day. Sometimes we will ask the kids, “Where did you recognize God today?” Ideally these simple questions begin to form us to be more mindful of God during our rush of activities during the middle of the day and not simply in the tranquility at the end.

Here are a few questions to get you started with the practice of examen. Remember, these questions are intended to be asked in communion with the Holy Spirit. Ultimately we desire him to illuminate our inner life.

Desolation—sense of God’s absence

When, today, did I sense being drawn away from God?

When did I feel most dissatisfied and restricted today?

Was there any time today when I felt discouraged?

What was the most draining part of my day?

Was there time today when I felt guilty, ashamed, or lonely?

Consolation—sense of God’s presence

When today, did I feel most touched by the presence of God?

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What events, relationships, or thoughts of the day drew me closer to God?

When did I feel most free?

What was the most life-giving part of my day?

What was most joyful about my day?

My Favorite Prayer Resources

Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home by Richard J. Foster

Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference? by Philip Yancey

The Divine Hours: A Manual for Prayer (3 Volumes) by Phyllis Tickle

The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence

A Testament of Devotion by Thomas R. Kelley

Letters to Malcolm: Reflections on the Intimate Dialogue Between Man and God by C.S. Lewis

Eat This Book: A Conversation on the Art of Spiritual Reading by Eugene H. Peterson

Sacred Listening: Discovering the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola by James L. Wakefield

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