



PRACTICES

P
rayer
Fall 2018

Prayer

“To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ.”

Richard Foster, 33.

What is prayer anyway? When kids ask that question, I usually say something like: “Praying is talking to and listening to God. We tell God about the things we are thankful for, what we need, for what others need, and what we are thinking and feeling. We also listen for God’s voice.” That definition is a start, but prayer is more simple and profound than that as well. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun has a compelling way to describe it: “Prayer is a word that describes a relationship.”

We pray because we have graciously been brought into union with the Triune God of all creation: Father, Son, and Spirit. Our union with God is the very reason that we exist. Nurturing that relationship through real conversation is one of the most important and life-giving things that we can do.

We pray because Scripture tells us that prayer affects real change. It is one of the real ways in which we participate in the Lord’s good work of redemption and reconciliation in the world. It is also one of the ways in which the Lord transforms us into the image of Jesus.

We pray because Jesus prayed. We pray because the Spirit prays on our behalf. We pray because God tells us to, for our good and the good of the world.

Prayer might sound easy were we to only read definition and not engage in it. But when we begin to pray, we also find it difficult work: we are easily swayed from praying and when we

do pray, we are easily distracted. Many times, prayer is filled with questions: why don't some prayers get answered? Doesn't God know everything? Doesn't God do as God wants anyway?

Despite the distractions and questions, even in the midst of them, it is a courageous act of trust in our good God to pray, to lay ourselves before Him time and again, and participate in His love.

The following are just some of the many ways to engage in prayer. Perhaps learning new ways of faithful prayer will free us up to pray all the more and open ourselves to the Spirit. If a new way of praying feels strange at first, that's normal. Try it out a couple of times before jettisoning it. Remember, the "effectiveness" of prayers isn't in how we feel about it, but in God's faithfulness to fill us and work in and through us even when we are unaware of it. If one practice in particular resonates with your soul, stick with that. There's no obligation to try all of these. If all of these prayer practices are familiar to you and you want to expand your practice of prayer, check out the resources listed at the end.

Above all, trust that God is with you, loves you, hears you, and is at work.

PAYG App (Pray As You Go)

We've been focusing on practices, also called spiritual disciplines or habits, for a couple of years as a congregation. If you read through what we have written so far, you'll find lots of encouragement to unplug and slow down - words that seem antithetical to technology. But technology can be helpful in many ways when used correctly, including in our spiritual life! This app is one such way. Here is the description from their website.

Pray as you go is a daily prayer session, designed to go with you wherever you go, to help you pray whenever you find time, but particularly whilst travelling to and from work, study, etc.

A new prayer session is produced every day of the working week and one session for the weekend. It is not a 'Thought for the Day', a sermon or a bible-study, but rather a framework for your own prayer.

Lasting between ten and thirteen minutes, it combines music, scripture and some questions for reflection.

The app is available for android and iOS. You can also listen here: <https://pray-as-you-go.org/home/#>.

Praying for Others (Intercession)

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

James 5:16

We are privileged and called to pray for one another, bearing one another's burdens. We can pray for others during concentrated set-apart time, and on the go. We can pray for others when we are with them, and in our personal prayer time. Praying for one another is a labor of love that we can do anytime and anywhere. Sometimes, however, the accent can fall on the labor instead of the love. Here are some ideas about how to pray for others that may free you up:

Listen first. Take time to listen to the Lord about how the Lord would like you to pray. Praying is not about getting God to do what we want, but about asking God what God wants. Richard Foster says it like this: "Listening to God is the necessary prelude to intercession....We must hear, know, and obey the will of God before we pray it into the lives of others."

Use your imagination. You don't always need to pray with words. Instead, you can use your imagination to picture what you are asking the Lord today. For example, you may imagine a sick person as well, a person down-in-spirit as smiling, a knotted tangled mess slowly untangle, or broken piece of art being lovingly repaired.

Brief, Intense, and Frequent. New Testament scholar Dale Bruner says that prayer should be brief (we don't need to be wordy or eloquent for God to listen), intense (when it comes to intercession, this means we focus on the other person) and frequent (self-explanatory!). This directive is helpful with all kinds of prayers, but it is especially helpful when it comes to praying for others. This is something you can do all throughout the day as particular people come to mind or you see them.

No one can feel hatred toward those for whom he prays.

John Chrysostom

Morning Prayer

Fixed-hour prayer, or Praying the Hours, is a way to regularly attend to God throughout the day. It involves specifying time when we turn from our work and pray - using Scripture, a written liturgy, or simply praying spontaneously. Fixed-hour prayer was used by devout Jews, including Jesus, the early disciples and our church fathers and mothers (most notably the Benedictines). It is a way of remembering that God is with us and that our work, play, and prayer belong to God and can be acts of worship.

If tackling all of fixed-hour prayer feels like more than you can do in this season, try Morning Prayer for 10 minutes each day for one week. The 1st Pres staff has been gathering for Morning Prayer together for a year and a half. We spend 10-15 minutes together and use a liturgy called *Seeking God's Face: Praying with the Scriptures throughout the Year* by Philip Reinders. It includes Scripture, times for silence to listen to God, and guided prayer. We'd highly encourage you to check it out! You can find other resources or pray through Scripture (see next page).

Praying Scripture

There is an assumption that floats around in evangelical churches that the only “authentic” prayers are extemporaneous ones in which we use our own words. This assumption, when swallowed or even sipped, causes us to cast a skeptical eye on scripted prayer. When we do, we miss one of the powerful gifts of prayer: God shaping us.

“But what if prayer is more than simply self-expression? What if prayer is a kind of craft or exercise that shapes us? What if God uses prayer to “act back on us,” to form us? What if set liturgical prayers are an ancient tool that reframe our perspectives and desires so that we might learn to pray in ways that are beyond us? For most of church history, Christians understood prayer not primarily as a means of authentic self-expression, but as a learned way of approaching God. The earliest prayer book of the church was the Psalms, which have been prayed, memorized, and sung in every language and time throughout the history of Judaism and Christianity.”

Tish Harrison Warren

Imagine if we relied only on our own feelings and words in our conversation with God. We’d become captive to our moods and our limited sight. Praying Scripture expands our vocabulary, forming us to love what God loves. It is a hedge that keeps us from using prayer to get God to do what we want, and instead gives God room to tell us what He wants. Praying Scripture is also a gift in the times in which we have no words - lost in grief, doubt, melancholy, confusion or whatever it may be that steals our ability to express ourselves or reveals that we do not truly know ourselves or what is best for us.

Here are some ways to pray Scripture:

- **Use the Lord’s prayer.** Pause after each phrase and let the phrase lead you into prayer. For example, after praying “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,” spend time adoring God for who He is.
- **Pray through the Psalms,** one each evening or morning, in order, even if the Psalm doesn’t match your current mood.
- **Other prayers:** Ephesians 1:15-21, Philippians 1:3-6, 9; John 17

Contemplative Prayer

*My heart is not proud, Lord,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.
(your name) put your hope in the Lord
both now and forevermore.*

Psalm 131 is one picture of contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer is a way of being with God, resting in God's grace, without the need to say words. It is a way to abide - remain, stay, make a home - in Christ (John 15:1-9).

The idea is easy to understand, but for us humans that are conditioned to DO stuff, it isn't easy. Our minds wander: lists and tasks and problems. Our hearts doubt: why am I not hearing from God? Our spirits question: does this really count?

Instead of giving up, or beating ourselves up, when these thoughts and emotions present themselves during prayer, we can notice them and give them to the Lord. Sitting with the Lord in quiet is a learned practice. Some tools that might be helpful include breath prayer (see below), lighting a candle to remind you of God's presence, or to use Psalm 131 with your name (above) as a way to quiet your mind and open your soul to receiving whatever the Lord may want to give.

*"Of all the Spiritual Disciplines, prayer is the most central
because it ushers us into perpetual communion
with the Father."
Richard Foster, 33.*

Breath Prayer

The breath prayer is a wonderful practice that allows us to bring our desire to God in a simple way that connects with our very breath. It is an ancient Christian practice that has been used at least since the 6th century. It's also known as the "Jesus Prayer," named after the most well known breath prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God; have mercy on me a sinner," sometimes shortened to "Jesus, have mercy." Breath prayers are short and simple, only 6-8 syllables so that you can verbally or silently pray it while you inhale and exhale. Breath prayers are an excellent way to meditate, quiet your heart, and know that God is God. They can be used anywhere and everywhere, even as you work and play.

Form your own breath prayer. Following these suggested steps may help:

1. **Ask God to direct your prayer**
2. **Choose a name and/or characteristic of God that tugs at your heart and mind.** This will be the first part of your breath prayer, prayed when you inhale.
3. **Reflect on what you, or another person, may need.** This will be the second part of your breath prayer, prayed when you exhale.
4. **Breath prayers can adjust depending on what you need and how God leads.**

Examples of breath prayers:

- Holy God....give us/me your peace.
- Lord Jesus.....be near.
- You are my shepherd...I shall not want.
- Abba....I belong to you.
- Pursuing God.....bring home my lost daughter

Prayer Postures

We are creatures with bodies and our bodies matter. Our bodies can be a part of our prayer, embodying our prayers and shaking us out of our routines which may help us better hear the Lord.

Try out one or more of these prayer postures:

- **Bowing** - is a posture of giving honor and respect (Psalm 95:6)
- **Kneeling** - is a posture of humility and dependence (Act 7:60; Luke 22:41)
- **Standing** - the early church often stood during corporate prayers. It is a posture of respect.
- **Lying prostrate** (flat on ground) - is a posture taken when overwhelmed by need, thanksgiving, or awe (Numbers 20:6; Revelation 7:11)
- **Hands raised** - is a posture of adoration (Psalm 134)
- **Palms up/down** - Holding open hands, palms up, during prayer is a posture of receiving. Placing your palms down is a posture of letting go. Try opening your hands while listening to God in silence, and then turning your hands over when praying for needs, releasing them to God's sovereignty.

Praying in Color

Prayers do not always need to be spoken in paragraphs. They can also be drawn with pictures or words. This is especially helpful when you don't have the words to fit your need, or when you aren't sure exactly what you want and need, but trust that God does. Is there something or someone for whom you feel led to pray? Draw or write the name of that person or situation (abstract doodling is quite okay!). For "coloring your prayer" templates (and more ideas about praying in color), go to <http://prayingincolor.com/handouts>

Praying By Mary Oliver

It doesn't have to be the blue iris,
it could be weeds in a vacant lot,
or a few small stones;
Just pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

Works Cited & Additional Resources

Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference?, by Philip Yancey

Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God, by Sybil MacBeth

Seeking God's Face: Praying with the Scriptures throughout the Year,
by Philip Reinders

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

The Celebration of Discipline, by Richard Foster

The Divine Hours, by Phyllis Tickle

“By the Book” by Trish Harrison Warren in
Comment: Public Theology for the Common Good

