

**Learning to Pray:
How Do We Do This?
Matthew 6:5-13**

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I hope you have been with us over these past few weeks as we have been looking at prayer, one of the basic parts of a growing faith. It has been a conversation, not an edict from on high! As I have said, I do not pretend to be an expert on prayer. No, I am more like a fellow pilgrim on the journey with you. What I have attempted to do in this series is to share some things I have gathered along the way, understanding that I have a long long way to go.

We started by just talking about what prayer is. The short version is that prayer is the way we have a conversation with God. Not a monologue, with us doing all the talking but a conversation, with both parties talking; Us, and God. That means we need to be listening too!

It also calls into question our theology, our idea, our understanding of who God is. Who is this entity you are talking with?

Is God a harsh taskmaster, always making us beg and grovel for the things of life, always looking for a way, a reason to punish us for everything we might do wrong?

Or is God love, always looking to do everything that God can do to bring about good to us and our world?

Those are very different images, and they do and will effect the way we pray, or don't pray!

And we have looked at some of the reasons we don't pray. Our image of God being one of them, our idea of what prayer is and does. But if we are honest, my guess is the reason we most often give is time. We just don't have the time!

Or should we say we don't make the time?

There are so many things demanding our attention that too often we don't take the time to center our lives, to connect with the ground of our being. Then we wonder why we feel so disjointed, so rushed, so not ourselves. Could it be that we are not doing the thing that really is the most important?

Another reason could be we just don't know how to pray. We are like the disciples in Luke's gospel who come to Jesus and say, "*Lord, teach us to pray.*" Prayer is something we have to learn.

My guess is that most of us know some prayers. We have been taught some prayers that we know by rote.

*God is great, God is good
Let us thank him for our food,
By his hands we all are fed,
Give us Lord our daily bread.*

How many of us, maybe even now, say that before a meal?

And how many of us learned the bedtime prayer,

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the lord my soul to keep
If I should die before I wake,
I pray dear Lord, my soul to take.*

Let's not talk about the terror of that prayer, nor even the theology, but we learned to pray that, didn't we?

And my guess is another prayer you know by memory is the Lord's Prayer, the one we often say in worship. *Our father, who art in heaven....* We know that prayer. We may

ask whether this is a trespasser or debtor church, but we know this prayer.

And because we know it, we often think that it doesn't count! Rote prayers, memorized prayers aren't as good as "real prayers."

Father James Martin reminds us though that memorized prayers are important. They connect us to believers throughout the world and across time.¹ The Lord's Prayer has been offered throughout the centuries. I have prayed it in Bali, in Prague, in Rome, in London, in Port Williams. It is a way we share the communal aspect of worship.

Many times our rote prayers express our feelings better than we can put into words. Because they are familiar they can be a comfort. At other times they are a great challenge.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Forgive us our trespasses in the same way we forgive others...

¹ James Martin, SJ. *Learning to Pray*. (HarperCollins:New York, 2021) Kindle Edition

Really? Do we really want that to happen? Is THAT what we are praying for? There are times when our memorized prayers can push us to examine our theology, ourselves.

Another way to pray is through the prayers of others. “Isn’t that cheating,” you might ask?

Not at all! At least I hope not! I have several books of prayers that I turn to often. One is a gift from a friend, an autographed copy of Walter Rauschenbusch’s *Prayers of the Social Awakening*. Written in 1909, it is as current as the day it was written.

I have a *Guide to Prayer for all God’s People*, a daily devotional that goes through the church year, Shane Caliborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and Enuma Okoro’s *Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, another daily devotional with prayers that help me. All of these widen my view to the larger world.

There are also time when a prayer by someone else says what I am feeling, what I want to say, far better than my words. Thomas Merton’s prayer in his *Thoughts in Solitude*

is universal in its appeal, and expresses our deep yearning in our following. Merton wrote:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will does not
mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact
please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that
desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right
road, though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be
lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will
never leave me to face my perils alone.²
I just don't know if I could improve on that!*

There are other ways that we might pray. In this new world where we stay in touch with family and friends via the internet there are wonderful apps that help us stay in touch

² Thomas Merton. *Thoughts in Solitude* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981) 79

with God. One that I use regularly is a daily podcast, *Pray as you Go*.³ This is a daily prayer session produced by Jesuit Media Initiatives, based in Britain. It is designed to be heard, as the name suggest, as you go. Ranging from 10-13 minutes it is a great resource on your commute, or while fixing breakfast. Just another way to pause for prayer.

Last summer Davita introduced us to Lectio Divina, a way of praying the scriptures, of seeing ourselves in the text, of allowing it to speak to us. There are sites online⁴ that will lead you through, allowing you to pause and center your life. I like this because I can hear the text as someone else reads it. It allows me to get into hearing rather than reading. Sometimes just using another sense opens up our prayer life in ways that we never could have imagined.

When Anita and I were in Bali our friends Jonathan and Tina Bailey held a Sunday evening session called Art and Contemplation, two things that I might say do not fit me, but is in Anita's wheelhouse!

³ <https://pray-as-you-go.org/>

⁴ Examples: <https://www.24-7prayer.com/dailydevotional>,
<https://www.lindsayboyer.com/lectio-divina-passages>

But we only had one scooter and so every Sunday evening I would take her and be there while they did drawings, meditating, praying. I was a spectator.

Or at least I thought! I got sucked into the practice

Recently come upon a similar way of praying called Visio Davina⁵, a practice where you still yourself and meditate on a picture, allowing it to speak to you, to see where you might discover God. It is another way in which we can pray with other senses than speech. It allows us to listen, to seeing what God might have to say to us.

All of these require us to stop, to set aside some time; to center our lives. We need that, but many times in the middle of the day we don't have the luxury of just being. What then? How can we "pray without ceasing?" How can we keep our lives centered on God?

About 15 years ago I had the opportunity to be a part of a program that radically opened my spiritual life.

Companions in Christ is a 28 week program that invites us to seriously look at our spiritual lives. I will confess that initially scared me off! As I told some people, I have had

⁵ <https://www.lindsayboyer.com/visio-divina-2>

relationships that didn't last 28 weeks! But our church was a pilot program and as I was the pastor it just seemed proper for me to take part.

I can honestly say it revolutionized my faith! Especially the 6 weeks we spent on prayer. The one thing that I especially remember is breath prayer.

I had never heard of it before. It is intended to be short, 6-8 syllables that can be said in one breath. With your eyes closed, imagine that God is calling you by name. Imagine that God is actually asking, "(Your name) what do you want?" Like the blind man on the road to Jericho, Jesus kindly looks you in the eyes and asks, "What do you want from me?"

Give God a simple and direct answer that comes honestly from your heart. Write down the answer. If you have more than one answer, write them down. Your answer may be one word such as peace or love or help. It may be several words or a phrase such as "feel your presence" or "lead me into life." Whatever your answers, they are the foundation of your breath prayer.

Select the name that you are most comfortable using to speak with God. Combine it with your written answer to the question God asked you. This is your prayer.

Breathe in the first phrase/word (generally your invocation of God's name) and breathe out the second phrase/word (request or need).

Some examples might be, Jesus, let me feel your love.

O Lord, show me your way.

Father/Mother, let me feel your presence.

I invite you to try it. Practice it several times a day—as you are washing dishes, driving in your car, sitting at your desk, whenever you just want to be in the presence of God, whenever you want to be reminded that you are a child of God.

How do we pray? The answers are as numerous as there are people. The answers are as varied as a menu at the greatest restaurant! Just as I don't eat the same thing for every meal, I don't pray the same way all the time! My faith needs the variety. There are times when I find that I go back

to the three basic prayers that Anne Lamott identified,
*Help, Thanks, Wow!*⁶

There are other times when the only prayer I can pray,
and the one I most need to offer is, “O God!”⁷

And that is enough!

How do we pray? Oh there are so many ways. In the
end, however, it is our deciding if we will connect ourselves
with the ground of our being. If we will, then as the ad says,
Just do it!

Just pray.

Just pray.

Amen.

⁶ Anne Lamott. *Help, Thanks, Was: Three Essential Prayers*. (Riverhead Books:New York, 2012)

⁷ Ed. Christman, the Great White Father, chaplain at Wake Forest University and one of my dear mentors taught me that!