

THE JESUS PRAYER

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” Or...

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Or simply...

“Jesus.”

see Luke 18:38-9 & Mark 10:47

Though unfamiliar to many in the West, the Jesus Prayer has a long and venerated history in Christianity, is central to spiritual practice in Eastern Orthodoxy, and is enjoying a growth in influence in the West today. As a means of relaxation, it has been discovered by Western science to be one of the most powerful tools available for turning off the fight/flight/fear mechanisms of the body (sympathetic nervous system) and turning on the relaxation response (parasympathetic nervous system). Below is some teaching on this that may help you enhance your experience of God’s peace in this prayer.

In its simplest form, the phrase above is repeated silently or out loud with each exhalation of breath. This is often done for a few minutes or encouraged for 20 minutes twice a day. When a distraction from the repeated prayer phrase occurs, one is instructed to merely notice the distraction, then, without any strenuous effort, gently return one’s attention to the prayer phrase. It is also used when travelling from place to place by foot. One finds that praying with the cadence of the walk brings the heart and thoughts back to God again and again throughout the day this way. Other refinements like below are taught in various traditions.

Hesychasm—Hesychastic prayer is prayer which transcends images and discursive thought. It is promoted by the Jesus Prayer. It is apophatic (i.e. does not use imagery). It is not exclusive of kataphatic prayer (i.e. uses imagery as in meditation) where full use of the imagination, poetry, music, symbols, ritual gestures, and art (icons) are used. Each rather deepens the other. Though termed at times Byzantine Quietism, it is distinct from Western Quietist heresy. “Hesychasm,” when applied most specifically, denotes one who practices the Jesus Prayer and who in particular adopts the “physical technique” which links the prayer to the following breathing technique.

1) Bodily posture: sit with head bowed, resting your chin toward your chest and directing your bodily eye together with your entire intellect (“*nous*” or “spiritual mind”) towards the middle of your abdomen. Alternatively, the gaze can be fixed on the place of the heart. Some sit on a low stool about 9 inches high. The shoulders are bowed and the back is bent.

2) Preliminary slowed breathing: breathe through the nose but consciously slow the rate. This evokes calmness and concentration before the actual invocation of the Holy Name.

3) The search for the heart: search inwardly for the place of the heart. Imagine the breath entering through the nostrils and then passing down within the lungs until it reaches the heart. In this way, the intellect (*nous*) descends with the breath & the intellect and heart are united. This creates the effect of a joyful homecoming like a husband to his family. Once here, begin the prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” each time you exhale. Some later sources of teaching suggest saying the first phrase on inhalation, and the last phrase on exhalation. Repeat with each breath. Some say the longer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Established within the heart, the *nous* or spiritual consciousness beholds itself totally luminous. Distracting thoughts are kept away by noticing them without frustration, letting them pass behind or beneath you, then gently re-centering the mind on Christ and the prayer. The physical technique combined with the Jesus Prayer phrase is a help in keeping guard over the heart. (*PRO 4:23 Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*) It creates inner simplicity, free from images and discursive thinking. The heart here signifies the deep center of the person as a whole, the point where the human personality is most directly open to uncreated

love. It promotes integration of mind and heart, exterior with interior. It is a total identification with and absorption in the prayer.

The prayer phrase itself, derives from the Bible. It is what was uttered by blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10 as follows:

And they came to Jericho; and as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"
And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."

From this arose the tradition that when Jesus hears this prayer, he stops what he is doing, however distracted, and listens to the prayer. Similarly, in Matthew 15:22, the Canaanite woman received Jesus' undivided attention when she voiced the same prayer.

And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon."

But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

And he answered, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Hesychia—(or *Hesuchia*) is the aim of disciplined spiritual life according to Basil. It is to keep the mind in tranquility. The way to attain this is to avoid distraction by means of detachment from the world, its opinions and stimuli. This requires the soul to let go of extraneous thoughts and develop a readiness to receive in one's heart the impressions engendered there by divine instructions, either through scripture or intuition. To this end, solitude is the greatest help, since it calms our passions and gives reason leisure to separate the soul completely from this distraction. Through this practice of tranquility, the soul is purified and, withdrawing into itself, ascends to the contemplation of God. Ravished by the divine beauty, the soul applies itself through reading and meditating on scripture to holding God continually in the memory, and we become temples of God.

"You know, brother, how we breathe: We breathe the air in and out. On this [is] based the life of the body and on this depends its warmth. So, sitting down in your cell, collect your mind, lead it into the path of the breath along which the air enters in, constrain it to enter the heart together with the inhaled air, and keep it there. Keep it there, but do not leave it silent and idle; instead give it the following prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.'"

St. Nikodimos And St. Makarios

Breathing exercises are the only practice that some ever use to achieve enlightenment. They seem to be especially well suited for our Western way of life. We are all too busy. It is very hard for us to find a quiet place for devotional time. And then to sit down and actually try to quiet the mind is very difficult for many. Practicing the breathing exercises gives the mind something active to focus on and they can be practiced with almost any kind of noise going on in the house. Actually, in the beginning weeks, months or whenever you can't get your mind to quiet down while practicing the breathing exercises, it can be helpful to play some devotional music quietly in the background. Something that moves you emotionally is best. Devotional music will grab the mind and as it encourages devotional states within you, at the same time these devotional states are encouraging the flowing of the Holy Spirit. Gregorian chants or spiritual music of any sort will do *if played quietly in the background*. If your mind seems overly active and you can't get it to quiet down, try this.

Says orthodox monk and spiritual leader, Father Maximos of Cyprus,

∴ Keep in mind that at the early stages of spiritual practice you must not be concerned with the quality of the Prayer, whether your mind is focused on the words or not. Whatever you do at that stage, your mind will be wandering. There is no way to avoid that. But the Prayer has its own power and energy. As you repeat it in your mind or aloud it will have a gradual impact within your psychospiritual world. Believe me,” Father Maximos added, “it will work like a bulldozer which opens up the road, gradually demolishing rocks and pushing the dirt away. That is how the Prayer works. It opens the road for Grace to visit the heart. And when that happens, then the heart works by itself independently of whatever else you do. It enters into an ongoing relationship with God.”¹

“But as I told you before, it is simple,” Father Maximos insisted. “Just fill up your idle time with the Prayer.”

“I don’t have idle time,” I reacted half-humorously.

“Look. You drive a car, don’t you? While you do that, you can neither read nor solve mathematical puzzles. Use that time to recite the Prayer. Or, while you cook, wash the floor, wait at a bus stop, recite the Prayer. If you get into the habit of filling up these empty time slots with the Jesus Prayer you will experience extraordinary benefits in your heart, truly extraordinary, believe me.”

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For further study read: *Centering Prayer* by Basil Pennington and *The Way of a Pilgrim* anonymously written in the sixteenth century.

Philippians 1:27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.

Isaiah 26:3 Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.

Troy Caldwell, M.D.

¹ *The Mountain of Silence* by Kyriacos Markides; p. 56, 203