

Starting to Pray

Note: If you're new to prayer or out of practice, consider praying "briefly and frequently" instead of "extensively and rarely." For most people, praying 10 minutes twice a day is better than an hour once a day, especially if you're struggling to build a habit.

A. Praying the Lord's Prayer

When the disciples said, "teach us to pray," this was Jesus's answer! (Luke 11:1-4, Mt 6:9-13). Pray it word for word, but also pray the things implied in it. Calvin wrote of the Lord's Prayer, "We would not have it understood that we are so bound by this form of prayer that we are not allowed to change it in either word or syllable...yet the sense ought not to vary." Relatedly, Tim Keller has written that we can pray the Lord's Prayer like a jazz musician — you should pray *around* the melody but don't *lose* the melody:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

We thank God for the immeasurable gift and privilege of calling Him "Father", and remember our fundamental identity as His totally beloved children, because of our adoption secured for us through Christ. Because this is our status before God, we know we can run to our heavenly Father with any care or concern (Luke 11:5-13). In saying "Hallowed be your name," we pray that God would be acknowledged as the holy, amazing, magnificent God that he is ("hallowed" = "consecrated"). We pray also that he would be honored, glorified and worshiped in everything that we do and say, and that he would be acknowledged as Creator and Savior by more people in our city and around the world.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray that God's salvation and rule would be known and embraced, and that we and all his creation would desire his purposes more than any other personal goal or desire.

Give us this day our daily bread

We pray that God would provide not only for our own spiritual and physical needs, but for the spiritual and physical needs of all people.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

We remember Christ's sacrifice that bought our total forgiveness and cleared our sin-debt before God, and we confess and repent of our sins that we still commit. Also, since we are undeserving people who have received amazing grace, we pray for the power and perspective to offer this grace to those who have wronged us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

We pray that God would deliver us from temptation, and that at the time of trials, he would equip us with what we need to be faithful to Him. We pray for his protection from evil – from within and without.

B. Praying Through Scripture

George Mueller was following Martin Luther's lead when he listed these questions of any text of Scripture:

- Is there any example for me to follow?
- Is there any command for me to obey?
- Is there any error for me to avoid?
- Is there any sin for me to forsake?
- Is there any promise for me to claim?
- Is there any new thought about God himself?

C. Using the ACTS Acrostic

This generally follows Jesus's teaching in the Lord's Prayer, but also categorizes important prayer foci in a memorable way:

- **Adoration:** Praise God for who he is!
- **Confession:** Name your specific sins and your general condition before him.
- **Thanksgiving:** Give thanks for what he has done!
- **Supplication:** (a fancy word for 'asking') Ask him for things (Luke 13:5-13; 18:1-8)

D. The Book of Common Prayer

Since the original came out in 1549, there have been many updated editions. The Anglican Church in North America published an updated edition in 2019 that is [available for free online](#). Search for orders of service for Morning, Noonday, and Evening Prayer, and Compline, as well as "devotions for individuals and families".

E. Practicing *Lectio Divina**

Lectio divina means "divine reading". It is a slow reading of the Scriptures which focuses on *listening* to the words (and the Holy Spirit, through the words), rather than rushing through them or simply gaining a discursive/intellectual grasp of them.

The process has four steps:

- 1) The first step is **reading**. One starts by selecting a short passage of Scripture, perhaps a Psalm. Read the passage slowly and out loud, taking time to pronounce and hear each

word. Often people read it two or three times. If you are practicing group Lectio, have a different voice read the passage each time.

- 2) The second step is **meditation**. As you read the text, you are listening for a word or phrase that stands out to you, takes hold of you, or touches you. When you find that word or phrase then meditate on it, say it over and over, give it your full attention, because, "...it is what God wants to say to us today." In this step, the praying person ruminates on the word or phrase allowing God's Word to become a word for them. One image associated with this step is an animal quietly and slowly chewing their food in order to get all the nutrition they can. Another image is the Virgin Mary, who often after hearing and watching Jesus was reported to have, "...treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2:19)
- 3) The third step is **prayer**. Here we are invited into conversation with the God who has invited us into His presence. In this step, we allow the Word to touch and change us at our deepest self.
- 4) The fourth step is **stillness**. In this step, we silently sit in God's presence. It is a wordless, quiet, and enjoyable rest in the presence of the One who loves us most.

F. Practicing the *Prayer of Examen**

Ignatius of Loyola's 'prayer of examen' was intended to help attend to God's presence throughout the day. At the end of the day, take a moment to become still and center on God's presence with you. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you through your day and bring to mind the following thoughts (You can view it in your mind like a video, going from hour-to-hour through your day):

Begin with...

Acknowledging Jesus' presence and ask Him to teach you.

Review your day from start to finish.

Ask God to bring to your mind the moment for which you are most grateful; when you were most able to give and receive love.

Where and how was God present in your day?

Take a moment to thank God.

Ask God to bring to your mind the moment for which you are least grateful; when were you least able to give and receive love?

If this brings a need for confession, offer it and receive God's forgiveness. Breathe in God's grace. Take a moment to let God's love fill you.

End with...

Pray a prayer of thanksgiving for God's mercy and love.

Journal your gratitude to God and record what you have learned about yourself.

Sometimes people practice Examen before sleeping, if this is your case, then ask God to refresh you as you sleep. Remember in the Old Testament, as well as in much of the world today, it is a gift to have a good night's sleep. Only those who feel safe can truly sleep deeply.

G. Practicing Solitude and Silence*

You can create places to be alone and silent before God, but it takes preparation—it won't just happen. The practice requires finding a location, checking schedules, blocking out time, and turning off electronics.

There are two ways of practicing solitude and silence. One is to engage in this spiritual practice by taking brief periods of time when possible. Second is by planning extended periods of time where the majority of a day (or longer) can be spent in solitude and silence.

Let's look at each way in more depth.

Brief Periods of Time:

Consider taking occasional "mini retreats" throughout each day for silence and solitude. An example of this might be taking a moment between meetings or classes to sit in silence. Or arrive early to an appointment with the express intent to find a quiet spot before it starts. Be creative. Not everything has to be complicated. Set a goal of having a time each day for silence and solitude.

Extended Periods of Solitude and Silence:

Plan for a few extended get-aways each year (a half-day, or longer). Locate special places which can be used for silence and solitude. Find them within your home, within walking distance, within a few minutes' drive, and for overnight retreats.

If you are new to silence and have only a short time to focus, set a timer and allow the timer to call you back. Otherwise, you may find yourself checking the time and sabotaging your silence.

One of the biggest obstacles to solitude and silence is the mere fact that you are purposefully not doing anything. We are not used to this, and you may start to remember all the things you *should* be doing—emails you have long forgotten to write will plague you and deadlines will haunt you. A strategy for this obstacle that you may find helpful is a practice called a "cognitive dump." A cognitive dump is when you take five minutes to write down everything that comes into your mind from your "To Do" list; i.e., appointments etc. When you have completed your list, fold the paper and put it in your pocket—let it serve as your temporary memory. Now that your mind has been cleared you can focus on your practice.

Now you are ready to engage silence. Set your timer if you need and begin. Silence is alien to many of us and it will feel awkward at first. However, as you practice, you will find your desire for silence grows.

H. Practicing Breath prayer*

It has been said that all breath is a type of prayer. In the Hebrew language it is believed that the name for God, YHWH, actually sounds more like a person breathing than a vocalized word. Could it be that every breath we take is a type of prayer to God, or an acknowledgement that our very breath comes from God?

Over the centuries Christians have practiced "Breath Prayers" as a way of praying rhythmically. A prayer often combined with a breathing motion is the "Jesus Prayer." The Jesus Prayer originated in the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition (some say it was developed by Theophan

the Recluse). Its origins trace back to Fourth Century Egypt. Adapted from the Blind Man's Prayer of Luke 18:38, this prayer is often said to be a way to satisfy Paul's admonition to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The person practicing this prayer finds themselves in a constant remembrance of God.

Preparing for the Practice:

Breath prayer can help us center. It can be a first step in preparing yourself to be present and focus before you start another spiritual practice. You may for example, start a time of silence by praying a breath prayer several times. Or prepare for a time of study by taking a few minutes to breathe in and out, to become settled and present to where you are.

If you would like to use the Jesus Prayer, the full wording is, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." It is meant to be prayed in a slow breathing motion. As you say, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God," breathe in. As you say, "...have mercy on me a sinner," breathe out. Imagine, as you breathe in, God's grace flowing in. As you breathe out, visualize your sin being blown out and away.

Engaging the practice:

The beauty of Breath Prayer is you can engage in it anytime and in any place. To engage the practice, first decide on the phrase or scripture you will be praying.

Here are a few other samples:

Christ have mercy.

Holy Spirit, fill me.

Give me strength, O Christ.

My God and my all.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Father, show me your love. Teach me patience, gracious God.

* The wording for these practices is taken from a workbook entitled *Engaging Spiritual Practices* by Gary Arntessoni. The author has given permission to share his work in full.