



Practicing Prayer

The Essential Practices Toolkit for Praying

introduction

If you've been involved in the church for a while, it is likely that you have heard a sermon on prayer, been asked to pray, and have heard others pray aloud. What we take away from these experiences of prayer form our understanding of how to pray, who can pray, when to pray, and the definition of prayer itself.

Prayer involves both speaking to God and allowing God to speak to us. The corporate practice of prayer is one form of communion with God, where we come to God in humility and honesty with ourselves and our faith community. By praying together, we encounter God in the tangible love and care of the community who journeys with us.

Individual prayer is an intimate communion with God, who knows us and knows our every weakness, and loves us still. Prayer can take many forms but is always an invitation for us to hit the pause button on our own agendas of life and place ourselves in a space where we can realign ourselves with God.

If we understand Sabbath to be an exchange of our daily rhythms for holy rhythms, then prayer becomes the threshold to Sabbath-keeping. Prayer can function like a pause button on our anxieties, fears, concerns, and troubles. It is key to entering into a Sabbath rest, allowing us to let go of those things which bind us or keep us stuck.

Sabbath, like prayer, can be both individual and communal. Sabbath offers a space for coming together in celebration of the communal bond we have in Christ. The practice of prayer in community is an opportunity for reconciliation with God and with one another so we may go back into the world to bear witness to God's reconciling love.

why prayer matters

Perhaps the most recognizable prayer is the Lord's Prayer. In that example of prayer, we find these words: "When you pray..." It wasn't an optional activity for those who followed Christ, it was expected as part of their lifestyle. Prayer is a human inclination to express our need, our joy, our desires, and our pain to God. In this way, prayer is an attitude and an orientation toward God.

Prayer is vital to our spiritual growth and the formation of our spiritual lives because it changes our outlook and our orientation. It restores hope, binds us to the community of faith, and bends us towards God's will. No doubt, life can be scary, regardless of how old or young you may be. In the face of an ever-changing world with complex issues that can sometimes seem insurmountable, prayer ought to be our hope that there is One who can bring peace to our hearts

"Prayer is none other than an expanding of our hearts in the presence of God."

-John Calvin

and meaning to our lives. Even more, when we pray on behalf of others, we move outside ourselves. We expand our capacity for empathy and compassion. We can be moved to action.

Prayer can also help us discipline our minds as we learn to deal with distractions. When we pray using various methods, we can engage our creativity and our imagination. When we learn to pray in the everyday moments of life, then each day is a prayer; an expression of our gratitude, our lament, our joy, our love to God.

Prayer matters in the life of faith because it is how we grow. When we pray, we are changed.

prayer in scripture

Consider these passages as you prepare to lead others in this practice:

The Lord's Prayer—Matthew 6:9-13

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one."

As mentioned earlier, probably the scripture most often associated with prayer is found in the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus teaches his followers how to live with one another in obedience to God. Again, it is notable that the gospel writer uses the word when and not if to present Jesus' teachings. This passage can be seen as Jesus' invitation to us to pray, rather than God's demand that we pray.

Also see Luke 11:1-4 – This is an abbreviated version of the Lord's Prayer, but in this passage, the prayer is provoked by the disciple's inquiry, "Lord, teach us to pray," which they make after watching Jesus pray. This passage in particular can open conversations about how individuals learned to pray, who (if anyone) taught them to pray, did they watch others pray, etc.

Ask, Seek, Knock—Matthew 7:7-8 and Luke 11:9-10

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

These are parallel passages in both gospels once again. The Luke text follows The Lord's Prayer in verses 1-4 where Jesus invites his followers into an intimate, parental-like relationship with God. He encourages them to address God as "Abba," which is often translated as "Daddy." This kind of relationship between parent and child is built on absolute trust that the parent will provide what is good and life giving. Sometimes the child's wants are not the same as the needs of the child. It is wise to be aware of what we say and teach about unanswered prayer. Ultimately, prayer is about our relationship with God more than about the answers we receive to our prayers.

Always Praying—I Thessalonians 5:16-18

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

These closing verses written by Paul sound a bit like the advice of a parent preparing to send a child off on a trip. "Don't forget to brush your teeth. Make your bed every morning. Be polite." Paul advises the Thessalonians to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all things. How is it possible to pray without ceasing? Paul is known for his use of exaggerated

phrases – always, in all things, unceasingly—so we should not think of this advice as a black and white standard for prayer. However, we can consider it an invitation to find ways to pray that flow in and through our lives in the context of an ongoing relationship with God.

prayer in action

There are lots of ways to practice prayer both individually and in community. When a new form of prayer practice is introduced into a community, be sure to provide a thorough explanation and an example of the practice. Individuals should never be forced to participate, but rather encouraged to experiment with new forms of prayer as a way of opening up to God in new and unexpected ways. Be sure to consider how to address the needs of a variety of ages and stages of individuals, reassuring everyone that there is no one way to pray, and encouraging them to try new ways of praying.

- ✦ **Write out your prayers.** Individuals can journal or write out their prayers.
- ✦ **Use Lectio Divina as a means of praying Scripture.** This form of sacred reading invites us to slow down and focus on the text, reading each verse carefully and thoughtfully, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide our understanding.
- ✦ **Experiment with a contemplative form of prayer.** Try using a breath prayer, walk a labyrinth, practice centering or contemplative prayer. Listen to sacred music like the Taizé chants, which are available through most major online music sites.
- ✦ **Pray the newspaper.** This is a great exercise with a family. Read an article about something that's going on in the world and invite those present to offer up a prayer for that issue. Keep in mind, not all news is appropriate for all ages.
- ✦ **Take a walk in nature.** Getting away to a natural setting can be very helpful to clear your mind and bring a sense of balance. Augustine said, "*solvator ambulando*," which means, "it is solved by walking."
- ✦ **Pray at meals consistently.** Regular prayers before a meal, when done intentionally, invite those present to consider how God has provided for them.
- ✦ **Fast and pray during a season or certain days.** Fasting may not be appropriate for everyone, in terms of age and health, but it is a way that Jesus taught us to pray. Using the time that one would typically eat and praying in its place can become a mini-Sabbath during our day.
- ✦ **Use a practice like the Ignatian Examen.** There are many online resources that have modified this monastic discernment practice for daily postmodern use. At its core, we find a way of reflecting that turns our minds toward how God is present in our daily lives. *Faith 5*, through Faith Incubators has a modified version of this aimed at families.

notes

prayer resources

Books

Book of Common Worship, Daily Prayer. Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals by Shane Claiborne & Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. Zondervan, 2010.

The Life of Prayer: Mind, Body and Soul by Allan Hugh Cole Jr. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Praying with the Body: Bringing the Psalms to Life by Roy DeLeon. Paraclete Press, 2009.

Story and Stretch: A Guide to Teaching Kids Yoga Using Gospel Stories and *Story and Stretch: A Guide to Teaching Kids Yoga Using Old Testament Stories* by Michele Gribble-Dates. Umbrella, 2019.

Story and Stretch: A Guide to Teaching Kids Yoga Using Seasonal Stories by Michele Gribble-Dates. Umbrella, 2016.

Writing to God: 40 Days of Praying with My Pen by Rachel G. Hackenberg. Paraclete Press, 2011.

Every Step a Prayer: Walking as Spiritual Practice by Thomas R. Hawkins. Upper Room Books, 2016.

Worm Watching: And Other Wonderful Ways to Teach Children to Pray by Ann V. Ingalls & Maryann Macdonald. Pilgrim Press, 2012.

Journey to the Heart: Centering Prayer for Children by Frank X. Jelenek. Paraclete Press, 2007.

Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God (enhanced and expanded edition) by Sybil MacBeth. Paraclete Press, 2019.

The Way We Pray: Prayer Practices from Around the World by Maggie Oman Shannon. Conari Press, 2001.

A Book of Reformed Prayers by Howard L. Rice & Lamar Williamson, Jr. Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

Praying with Mandalas: A Colorful, Contemplative Practice by Sharon Seyfarth Garner. Upper Room Books, 2017.

Prayer for People Who Can't Sit Still by William Tenny-Brittian. Chalice Press, 2005.

The Prayer Experiment Notebook by Miranda Threlfall-Holmes & Mina Munns. SPCK, 2018.

Bead and a Prayer: A Beginner's Guide to Protestant Prayer Beads by Kristen E. Vincent. Upper Room, 2013.

Curriculum

[*A Season of Peace.*](#) Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Mission Agency, 2020.

[*Praying in the Messiness of Life*](#) by Linda Douty. Upper Room Books, 2011.

[*Justice and Peace Shall Kiss: Praying through the Year.*](#) Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Mission Agency.

[*Christian Prayer for Today*](#) by Martha L Moore-Keish. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Online Resources

["Celtic Prayers for Traveling."](#) *Building Faith*, Virginia Theological Seminary.

["Prayer Stations."](#) Still Waters: Creative Worship and Prayer Station Ideas by Theresa Cho.

[d365 devotions.](#) Passport, Inc., co-sponsored by the Office of Christian Formation, PC(USA).

[Daily Prayer app.](#) Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Mission Agency.

["Faith5."](#) Faith Inkubators.

["How to Chant the Psalms."](#) Presbyterian Mission Agency.

[Pray As You Go.](#) Jesuits in Britain.

["Prayer Resources."](#) The Upper Room.

["Review Your Day with God: Daily Examen."](#) Building Faith, Virginia Theological Seminary.

["Praying Before Meals at Home."](#) by Gary Taylor. Building Faith, Virginia Theological Seminary.

[World-Wide Labyrinth Locator.](#) Veriditas and the Labyrinth Society.