

The Practice of Prayer

By Shelley Frew and Lisa Scheffler

Take the next five days to grow in your prayer life. You'll find different exercises each day. Try them all, and find which ones work for you!

Day 1 | Reflect on Your Prayer Life

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he stopped, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples."--Luke 11:1

Of all the spiritual disciplines prayer is the most central because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the father. —Richard Foster

Prayer is a learned skill. At times it requires a taming of our minds and sustained effort. At other times prayer may mean resting wordlessly in God's presence and trusting in the triune God's word within us. It's a varied, ongoing practice that allows us to enter into communion with God. There are many ways to pray and no specific formula can bring us closer to God. Prayer is more than the words we use and, while Scripture teaches us to pray for our needs, prayer is also much more than what we ask of God in our prayer. Professor and spiritual formation writer M. Robert Mulholland writes in his book *Invitation to a Journey: A Roadmap for Spiritual Formation*:

The consideration of prayer as a classical discipline of the Christian tradition brings us up against the functional priorities of our culture. We tend to think of prayer as something we do in order to produce results we believe are needed or, rather, to get God to produce the results. Go into any Christian bookstore and note the number of books devoted to techniques of prayer. We are interested in knowing what works and developing the skill that will ensure that our prayers are effective. As a result, our prayer tends to be a shopping list of things to be accomplished, an attempt to manipulate the symptoms of our lives without really entering into a deep, vital, transforming relationship with God in the midst of what we think we need (usually forgetting that "your father knows what you need before you ask him" Matthew 6:8) and in the midst of the symptoms of our lives.

Ultimately, prayer can usher us into a " deep, vital, transforming relationship with God." Prayer invites us to let go of our expectations, control, and personal comfort. God will use our time in prayer with him to change us even if the circumstances we pray about never change. Mulholland writes, Prayer "is the act by which the people of God become incorporated into the presence and action of God in the world. We can expect prayer to change us, how we view God, and how we view the world.

- How would you describe the current state of your prayer life?

In Luke 11:1 when the disciples ask Jesus to teach him how to pray, Jesus modeled for them the Lord's prayer (Luke 11:1 –4). Keep in mind, the disciples had spent their lives praying! They have been devout Jews and have been following Jesus, so it is not as if they had never been taught to pray.

Regardless of how long we have followed Jesus or how new we may be to the Christian faith, we can always grow in our prayer lives too. For the next five days we will practice different kinds of prayer. Sometimes it's helpful for people to pray in a structured way in order to grow in their prayer life. This week we will practice several exercises, and this will give us the opportunity to commune with God in a structured way that helps us focus our thoughts and attention.

Today, pray the Lord's Prayer out loud. First take a few breaths and spend a few moments in silence. Invite the Spirit to quiet your mind and focus it on God.

Pray each phrase and fill in your own thoughts and requests as you go.

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,*

Acknowledge God as your Father — his great love and care and his great authority. Praise God for his steadfast love and holiness.

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

Invite the Father to do his will in your life and the life of your community. Ask him how you can participate in his kingdom work here on earth.

Give us today our daily bread.

Take your needs to God. Anything that is a burden, take it to your Father in prayer.

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

Confess your sins and receive God's forgiveness. Release anything you are holding against someone else. Forgive as you've been forgiven.

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

Ask for the Spirit's help in turning away sin — particularly habitual sin. Ask for wisdom and endurance. Ask for protection from the forces of darkness who seek to divide us from God.

Day 2 | Practicing ACTS prayer

The ACTS prayer involves a time of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication (or praying specifically for our needs for the needs of others). In adoration, we spent time adoring God, his character, his works in creation and in history. It is a time of God-centered praying and worshiping God for who he is. After a period of adoration, we will enter into a period of confession. In a moment of quiet ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind sin you are aware of as well as sin you have been unaware of and confess that before God. Third, we will thank God with grateful hearts for all that he has provided and for the many blessings we experience throughout the day each day. Finally, in a time of supplication we will come to God with our needs and the needs of others.

We have the privilege of communing with God in prayer because of our vital relationship with God in Christ Jesus. It is the posture of our heart before God which matters more than the words we use in our time with him, and, through these different practices, we give God the opportunity to change our hearts even as we pray.

Adoration—After a few moments of silence, spend some time in *adoration* of God, his character, and his mighty works in creation and history....

Confession—Following a time of adoration, ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you where you have sinned either deliberately or without knowledge and confess that to God now...

Thanksgiving—Take time now to recount to God with a heart of gratitude all that you are thankful for in the day...

Supplication (request)—Finish your time in prayer by communicating to God your needs and desires and the needs of those around you and those in the world...

Let's close: *Oh gracious and loving God, we come before you as grateful women. We are grateful for free access to commune with you in prayer because of your son Jesus Christ, what he did for us on the cross and accomplished upon his resurrection. Thank you for rescuing us from a life of darkness and separation from you. In Jesus name and by the power of the Holy Spirit, amen.*

Day 3 | Praying God's Word

When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, Lord God Almighty. (Jeremiah 15:16).

One way to enrich your prayer life is to incorporate scripture into your prayers. When we allow scripture to inform and shape our prayers, we find that our praying becomes less “me-focused” and more “God-focused.” Whenever you read your Bible, watch for passages to talk with the Father about. Conclude your time in the Word by praying part of the passage back to God. There is no right or wrong way to do this, but here is a template you might want to try.

1. Invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you through God's word. Watch for passages that reveal something about God's character or how he relates to us. For example, let's look at Matthew 11:28–30 from the NIV translation and *The Message* paraphrase because sometimes it's helpful to look at scripture in more than one version.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (NIV)

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." (*The Message*)

2. Read slowly and carefully. Meditate on each phrase. What are these verses revealing to you about Jesus? What are they revealing to you about your relationship with Jesus?

Example: Jesus invites us to come to him, especially when we are weary and burned out. He wants to be with us — to walk with us and teach us. He will never give us anything too heavy or ill-fitting, like an Ox fitted in a yoke and made to pull a plow. What he gives us to carry is light. He does the heavy lifting. We can rest.

3. What in these verses call you to praise and thanksgiving? Turn parts of these verses into a prayer of praise.

Example: "I praise you Jesus for being gentle and humble of heart. Thank you, Jesus for inviting me to come to you. Thank you for giving me rest from all that is weighing me down."

4. Allow these verses to shape your requests. Share the desire of your heart. What can you ask of God based on what you've read?

Example: "Jesus, I want to learn from you! I want to walk with you moment by moment. Teach me the unforced rhythms of grace. Show me how to surrender my burdens to you and pick up only what you ask me to. I want to live freely and lightly under your loving care. I will follow you."

Now try it with a passage of your choosing. You might try Romans 8:31–29, Psalm 103, Exodus 15:1–18, Philippians 4, John 17:20–25. Reword the passage into a prayer in any way God leads you.

Day 4 The Practice of Examen

And I pray this, that your love may abound even more and more in knowledge and every kind of insight so that you can decide what is best, and thus be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. —Philippians 1:9–11

The examen provides a way of noticing where God shows up in our day. It is a practice that attends to what we might otherwise miss in the press of duties and busyness. —Adele Calhoun

(The following section is quoted from Adele Calhoun's spiritual disciplines handbook, pages 53 – 54)

Throughout the centuries prayerful people have found direction for their lives through the practice of the examen. The examen provides a way of noticing where God shows up in our day. It is a practice that attends to what we might otherwise miss in the press of duties and busyness. The questions of the examen open our attention to how God's internal movement is present in our external comings and goings. They lead us to listen deeply to the data of our lives. These questions help us pay attention to our mental state, our body responses and our emotional baggage. Our insomnia, nervous stomach, difficult interaction and headache can all take their place as a possible way of more deeply leaning into God. The examen helps us recognize the things that bring us death and life. Once these things are known, they become part of our ongoing interaction with God in prayer.

The examen can open us to both the difficult and beautiful in our lives, relationships, and profession. [It] is also a useful way of reflecting alone or with others on what God is saying to us through a meeting, a class, a meal, a service project, a relationship or a conflict... [It] is a wonderful tool for discerning the places you feel most alive, most grateful, most present to the fruit of the Spirit as well as the times and places where you do not.... The examen invites attention to both low and high points, recognizing both of these as an invitation to prayer.

Perspective and direction for the future happen through listening to where and how God shows up in your day and then interacting with God in prayer. Awareness of the Spirit's enlivening and enlightening presence puts you in touch with the kind of person God created you to be. When you begin to recognize who God created you to be, you have the raw material for discerning God's unique call and design for your life."

Follow the Daily Examen included below. Begin with quieting your heart before God. Focus your mind and heart. Go through the examen with God.

The Daily Awareness Examen

This short prayer exercise is to help increase your sensitivity to the Spirit working in your life and to provide you with the awareness needed to co-operate and respond to God's presence. If you use this daily you should find it helpful in noticing spiritual movements and choosing to respond wisely to them. The Awareness Examen is meant as a time of reflection, usually at the end of the day, and can be done in 30 seconds or 30 minutes. It involves five stages:

1. Thanksgiving

Begin by looking over the day and asking to see where you need to be thankful. Do not choose what you think you should be thankful for, but rather look over the day to see what emerges, what you notice, even slightly. Allow gratitude to take hold of you and express this to the Holy Spirit who at this moment beholds you.

2. Ask for Light.

This is a prayer for enlightenment from God. We dispose ourselves for the awareness that we hope will come more directly from God. We have a hard time believing that our own thoughts can actually be

from the Spirit but Jesus tells us in Matt 10:20, “it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” Likewise Paul tells us in Rom. 8 that “we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” Therefore ask the Spirit to show you what God wants you to pray.

3. Finding God in All Things

Again look over the events of the day. This time ask the Spirit to show you where God’s presence has been in your life, either in you or in others, and in the events of your day:

- What events in your day have had an impact upon you?
- Where are the signs of the Spirit, i.e. of light?
- Where are the signs of discouragement of spirit, i.e. of darkness?
- What interior events were significant for you?
- Notice what stands out even slightly, such as joy, pain, turmoil, increase of love, anger, harmony, anxiety, freedom, isolation, a sense of the presence or absence of God
- Where do you sense you were being drawn by God’s Spirit?
- How did you respond to these events or experiences?

4. Respond to God In Dialogue

Is there any one area you are being nudged to focus your attention on, to pray more seriously over, to take action on? This is where your energy needs focus instead of on the many other things you think are important. Discuss this with Jesus.

Express what needs to be expressed:

... praise ... sorrow ... gratitude ... desire for change intercession ...

5. Help and Guidance for Tomorrow

Ask God for your needs for tomorrow. For example, you may need to pray to overcome something ... to be more sensitive to God’s activity in your environment ... to celebrate in some way ... to let go ... to be open to conversion in some area ... to make some decisions to act against some destructive forces in your life; to desire a particular grace from God; to desire to desire.

Day 5 | Prayer as a Conversation

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how we should pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groanings.

—Romans 8:26

A man prayed, and at first he thought prayer meant talking. But he became more and more quiet until the end he realized that prayer is listening.

—Soren Kierkegaard

Recently I was at a wedding dinner and learned something significant about my prayer life. The guest seated next to me introduced himself, then added his nickname to his extended family—the talking cousin. Over the course of the evening, I learned a lot about my new friend. I found him engaging,

pleasant and worthy of his nickname. When we parted I knew many details of his life story, including the details of a recent hospital stay for low sodium levels. It occurred to me that he knew nothing about me, and perhaps didn't even remember my name. That night as I was getting ready for bed and talking to the Lord, I realized in a mental midsentence that often, like that very moment, I was the "talking cousin" in my prayer time much more often than I realized.

Prayer is conversation, but as I experienced that evening over dinner, conversation is a two-way street. More often than not, I was the one completely setting the agenda in my prayer times — talking, literally, without ceasing. It was this realization that made me more intentional about setting aside time for wordless prayer, usually after a time of silence, to let *God* guide our time together, intercede for my concerns (Romans 8:26), and bring to my attention Scripture and guidance through the Spirit.

I need time to enjoy his companionship in an intimate time of silence like I enjoyed with my husband. I still have much to learn about being more comfortable in God's presence without the need to fill the space with my thoughts and words and requests. I find that the more I practice this type of prayer, God often guides me in a different way to pray over a person or circumstance.

Today in our practice of prayer, we will practice this more unstructured format of prayer in silent prayer.

- Take a moment to reflect upon your habits in prayer. How would you evaluate your prayer life, are you more like the talking cousin, more like the silent companion, or a good balance of both?
- It's important to know that God always meets us where we are today in our prayer life, not where we wish we were. He wants to know the real us rather than who we'd like to be in Christian maturity. Take a moment to write down any thoughts, questions, or feelings you may have concerning your prayer life:

After a time of silence, look at any thoughts or concerns you may have and say, "I'm lifting up my questions, and these other aspects concerning my prayer life to you now, God."

- Continue in a posture of prayer and in a word release each problem or circumstance that's gnawing at your heart. If your mind begins to wander during prayer, repeat a short prayer such as, "here I am, Lord." Rest in a space of silence before continuing...
- Next, lift up one by one people who are on your heart and mind to pray for... Release each person or groups of people slowly by name... Rest in a space of silence.
- Finally, ask "Lord, are there others in my life you'd have me pray for now?" See who, if anyone, the Holy Spirit brings to your recollection. If certain people or groups come to your attention lift them up by name and picture yourself releasing them in God's presence.

Close with a prayer of thanksgiving. Name five sources of or things to be grateful for today (example "Lord thank you I could come to church this morning even though it was a rough time getting myself and the kids here," or "Thank you for the lovely sunset last night. I notice the colors in the clouds. Thank you that you are a god of beauty,").