

CHRISTIAN PRAYER

Jesus Christ and Prayer

THE POINT OF PRAYER, for a Christian, is Christ and His Church: Christians believe that Jesus is the most important way find God's grace in our world – God come into our midst in a manner that we could see, touch, and hear.

Therefore, the main focus of Christian prayer is to get to know Jesus, our Savior: For a Christian, prayer is ultimately about a **RELATIONSHIP** with Jesus Christ – personally and through being part of the Church that Jesus gave us.

How do we do this? How do we grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ? One thought would be that focusing on **THE FOUR GOSPELS** (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) also is a way to introduce ourselves, bit by bit, to JESUS – for the Gospels are the actual words and actions of Jesus Christ. As St. Jerome said in the 4th century: “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.”

We also can see **HOW OTHERS** followed Christ through looking at the **LIVES OF THE SAINTS** (i.e. – look to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Francis of Assisi or Elizabeth Ann Seton or others to see **HOW THEY** tried to find Christ and to see Christ in others.)

We can also find good examples or role models in living a life that leads us to Christ through **OTHER PEOPLE THAT WE KNOW** – people in our parish, in our family, etc.

And we **AUGMENT** our personal prayer life, and assist our own journey of faith, when we take advantage of **PRAYING WITH OTHERS** in the sacraments, in our faith community, etc.

What Did Jesus's Words and Actions Say About Prayer

Here are a few things that Jesus told us about prayer or **SHOWED** us about prayer through his example:

1. First of all he warned that we **not parade our prayer or our fasting or our good works** so that others will see them. (Mt. 6:3), (Mt. 6:5) (Mt. 6:6) and (Mt. 6:18.) S Jesus also cautioned that **PRAYER** needs to be sincere (Luke 7:44).
2. Second: He prayed with the larger community of faith – he wasn't a lone ranger when it came to faith. He practiced community by going to synagogue (Luke 4 says that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath Day “as he was in the habit of doing.” And community was central, of course, to the whole way Jesus went on his mission – gathering a group of disciples who lived and prayed and ministered together, and then **STARTING THE CHURCH** to be a continuation of that community of disciples he began after the Resurrection.
3. Third: While community is important, we can also see from the life of Jesus that he promoted that we **NEED** times of **silence** in our lives to keep up a relationship with God. How do we “come away” by ourselves “to a deserted place to rest for a while” (Mk 6:31)?
4. **When the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, He teaches them the Our Father.** (Lk 11: 1-4, Mt 6:9-10). Let's look at the “Our Father” then, the prayer that Jesus taught us, as a guide to prayer:
 - a. *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.* – Our prayer is about turning to God as our Father – as a God who love us – and to reverence God in our lives (“keep holy” his name.)
 - b. *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* – Our prayer is to pray **FOR** the coming of the Kingdom of God/that God's will be done in the world **AND** that God **STRENGTHEN US TO WORK FOR THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM IN THE WORLD/to do His will in the world.**
 - c. *Give us this day our daily bread,* -- We pray that God **provide for us** in our journey of faith. Could bread also be interpreted as our spiritual bread?
 - d. *and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us* – An important part of the Christian life is giving and seeking forgiveness.
 - e. *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* – Our prayer time is a time to ask for the help of God to keep us from sin and to protect us from evil: **TO ASK FOR GOD'S HELP!**

Just Do It

Sometimes people worry about how to pray...and we will get into a lot of different ways pray in this text, but the only way to learn how to get into this relationship with Jesus Christ is to DO it. Every person is different, so the way that you end up generally praying might be very different from how other people pray.

At the same time, one great part of being in a community of faith (like the Catholic community) is that you don't have to invent the wheel, constantly, when it comes to faith. Indeed, we come from a long tradition of very prayerful and holy people – and many saints and great minds have weighed in on different ways to pray. So you have all of their ideas and inspirations to help you too....

SO – using the best of Christian tradition AND following your heart...just get started. Sit in a chair, go on a walk, get a Bible, find some good prayers, have a rosary, listen to inspiring music, use religious art....everybody's different. Figure out a time when you can be quiet (and where) – whether that's at home, at work or even in your car.... And start. Then later we can reassess if we are praying at the optimum time or if we need to make some changes, but let's start.

Maybe Start Off Slow

Sometimes we have to start out **slow**.... And not be overly ambitious. For example, recently, on the pastoral council where I work as a priest, one of the members of the council stated, “People will ask me, how can you do a whole hour and pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament, how do you do that???” She thought that maybe we can encourage people to start out by coming to the chapel or the Blessed Sacrament Oratory for 5 or 10 minutes to pray, and then to build from there.

Another time I heard about a suggestion for people who are having trouble keeping a commitment to pray: The person that taught me this said, “I know so many people who make a big commitment to God to maybe pray 30 minutes every morning...but they don't keep that commitment and then they stop praying entirely because they feel bad about not keeping their commitment. SO, this person said, “Instead, start out small and KEEP your promise to God and BUILD UP from there.....So, his rule was the “two and two rule”: To take two minutes in the morning to pray, and when you are done, to put the Bible or your prayer book on your pillow. Then in the evening, before you can sleep, you have to take the book from your pillow and pray two more minutes (at least), this time using the Bible/Breviary/book. Then you put your book on the shoes you will wear the next day and you have to pick up the book in the morning and pray two minutes (again) before you can put on your shoes.

Start small and keep your commitment, and then build up from there.

Have A Regular Routine

Matthew Kelly writes, in Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic, that Catholics who stick with their prayer do the following:

A routine of prayer: They have a set time to pray, place to pray and a structure to their prayer. And that their routine was developed BY TRIAL AND ERROR: That they just kept trying different formats and styles things UNTIL SOMETHING CLICKED. SO, if you think you “can't pray well” – maybe you just haven't found the format that works for you. Everybody is different.

Myself? I pray in the morning when I am having my coffee. And I paint a bit so I put religious paintings I am working on all around where I pray. And I keep a Bible and a journal there. It works for me. **You need to find what works for you and to keep at it until something clicks – and you'll find examples of different ideas and styles below.**

Silence

Jesus sought out quiet times away from everyone else in the Scriptures, and encouraged his disciples to do that same. So, let's follow Jesus's example and advice to just be quiet SOMETIMES IF WE WANT TO FIND GOD. IF WE ARE MORE ACTIVE, THIS CAN HAPPEN WHILE WE WALK OR RUN OR SOMETHING....But let's

get into the occasional habit of being quiet. Reminds me of a true story by Sr. Jose Hobday:

I was twelve years old and growing up in New Mexico. One Saturday I was expecting my young friend Juanita to come over; but my friend could not come over after all, so I began to make a nuisance of myself with each member of the family. Finally my father had enough and he told me “Get an apple, a blanket, and a book and come with me”, and we got into the family truck and drove off. We drove about eight miles from home to a tree on the edge of a canyon. My father dropped me off with my apple, blanket, and book, on a canyon ridge under a pinion tree. He told me he’d be back by evening, said “Now, learn to live with yourself” and he left.

I thought it was a little harsh so the first thing I did after he drove away was to throw the apple, the blanket, and the book off the edge of the cliff and sit down and cry. After a while though I began to notice where I was—it was a long time until evening. I climbed down the cliff to recover my losses, stretched out on my blanket under the tree and began to read. It took a few hours, but gradually the world began to come alive for me in a new way. The sky got bigger, noises were new, the silence was loud, and I was in touch. I found myself sitting still, doing nothing. By the time evening came I was wiser: I had learned that something happens in solitude, that doesn’t happen any other way. From then on I began to go off for long stretches into that land. I believe this was the beginning, in my life, for the lasting taste of the prayer of solitude.

Of course, it sometimes takes a while to get ourselves used to silence....Indeed, the author Matthew Kelly in his book Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic compares getting used to silence, in prayer, to how a couple, first dating, get used to silences together by the time they have been married for many years.

But – even while it takes a while to get used to prayer, it is worth the effort to get used to some quiet time – whatever works – going for a walk, exercising while we are quiet, lingering after a daily mass during a lunch break to be quiet, listening to some music and then being quiet afterwards....but we find God not in just rolling through a lot of prayers or in quickly asking God to bless our day, but in following model of our Savior Jesus who sought out times of quiet....and the instructions He gave to the disciples. Jesus and his instructions are our model for prayer.....So quiet time is important.

Indeed, Bishop Fulton Sheen, a famous bishop from the 1950’s, once also wrote that if we were going to give up any part of our prayer because of busyness, the part of our prayer that was most important was to just sit and be with God in silence.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church lists (Paragraph 2715) a comment that a parishioner in Ars, France told his priest, St. John Vianney, about his prayer, “When I was young I tried to tell God everything in prayer, later I got so I tried very hard to listen to God in prayer, now that I am old I just **look at him and he looks at me**.

So, while we want to have a structure and helps to our prayer time, there needs to also be time to just be quiet with God.

Ways to Pray

Having said all of the above, what about the actual ACTION of prayer? Are there some ideas out there?

1. Can you keep a Bible or have access to the Bible electronically and read a passage of one of the four Gospels each day? And then pray about that passage? A few times recently Pope Francis has encouraged Christians to keep a Bible with them at all times so that they can pray when inspired during the day. *St. Jerome Press* www.stjeromepress.com or 1.800.845.2648 has Bibles from \$4.25 and catechisms from \$7.99. OR refer to *The Bible App: bible.com/app*.
2. Can you spend some time during your prayer assessing how you have been acting towards other people (examine your life) and then asking God for help to be a good Christian?
3. Can you think of all the things that you are thankful for? Remember the faces and hear the voices of people who have been good to you?
4. Can you lift up others in prayer? Ask God to bless family, friends, those in need?
5. Can you ask God to help you be a better Christian?
6. Can you pray a decade of the rosary? Or a whole rosary. *Go to www.catholic.org to get a text of the rosary.*

7. Can you find a good LITANY to start off your prayer? (i.e. – you might look up “The Litany of the Sacred Heart” as an example or “The Divine Mercy Chaplet.) *Go to www.catholic.org to get a text of these prayers.*
8. Could you have a good inspirational song to play to open up your prayer? – or sing a song yourself?
9. Could you find a holy place to go – the National Shrine or a beautiful spot outdoors – to inspire your prayer?
10. Could you have some religious art to inspire you? Like a crucifix or a picture of the Holy Family?
11. Can you get to daily mass and then pray before or after mass once in a while?
12. If you are married, can you pray, holding hands, for God to bless your marriage each day (in addition to personal prayer.) If you have a family, can you all pray together for God to bless your family each day (in addition.....)
13. Can you pray on the Sunday readings some during the week as a benefit to daily prayer and also as a preparation for the Sunday mass? *You can find daily readings for daily mass, and the daily Prayer of the Church at www.universalis.com. Good Resources with reflections on the daily scripture readings for each day, the saints of the Church calendar. Maybe also refer to <http://liturgy.slu.edu/>. Also “Laudate,” a free app.*
14. Could you read about a saint? You can also get daily emails on the saint of the day and the readings of the day by signing up at www.pray.nd.edu OR www.americancatholic.org.
15. Could you do an on-line retreat? You can go to www.sacredspace.ie or other sites for a multitude of on-line retreats which you can do at your computer. Some are short and could be done during part of a lunch-break at work, or while the kids are taking a nap.

CHILDREN AND PRAYER:

1. You can refer to the “We Parent More” app: The app has six different buttons which include information on the Catholic faith, blogs from young Catholic parents, Mass and confession times for parishes across the United States, and games for kids.
2. You can go to www.catholicmom.com.
3. Refer to the Children’s Bible App: 800-533-8095 or www.smp.org.

HERE ARE ALSO SOME PRAYERS AND TECHNIQUES:

Typical Catholic prayers – Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, Guardian Angel Prayer, Angelus, Act of Contrition, Litanies like the Sacred Heart Litany, Novenas like the Novena to the Holy Spirit (“Novena” comes for the word for “nine” and it is about praying for nine days on a certain topic.) Divine Mercy Chaplet, Rosary.
www.ewtn.com/devotionals/prayers/ or www.catholic.org.

Stations of the Cross – These are prayers that remember the different events of the PASSION OF JESUS in facing the Cross and THEN THE RESURRECTION. www.catholic.org

The Liturgy of the Hours: An ancient prayer form that people in monasteries have used for centuries; and which many lay persons and parishes now use as well, is the “Liturgy of the Hours.” It is a series of prayers and scripture designed for communal prayer at different times of the day to punctuate all the times of the day with prayer. You can order the four-volume form or a much shorter version called “Shorter Christian Prayer” on-line.

PRAYER STYLES

Centering Prayer:

1. Sit relaxed and be quiet. Find a prayer posture that works well for you. Close your eyes and begin to center/focus yourself. Perhaps you can do this by becoming aware of your breathing.
2. Be aware of God’s love and presence.
3. Read from scripture or perhaps listen to a hymn and choose a word to help you focus on being aware of and loving God. Let this word be gently present to you. This word may be a name for God, or a quote from Scripture too. The Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” could be repeated over and over. This prayer can be rhythmically combined with one’s breathing: with maybe half the prayer said while one breathes in, and the other half while one breathes out.
4. As one’s thoughts travel, return to God using the word you have chosen.
5. At the end, pray the “Our Father.”

Lectio Divina:

1. READ a passage from Scripture to yourself silently—preferably a short passage (Lectio). Read it slowly. If I am drawn to a certain phrase, and am beginning to reflect on its meaning in my life, I have already begun the next step—“Meditatio”.
2. MEDITATE on the passage, or a part of the passage (Meditatio). You might even take a couple of words to repeat over and over, or read the words out loud. The point would be to follow you heart and senses towards what is most significant to you, especially in terms of your own life.
3. PRAY—let the reading and meditation lead you to an interaction with God (Oratio).
4. CONTEMPLATE God—just be with God.

Ignatian Prayer: 1. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to pray. 2. Become quiet, focus on yourself. 3. Read a passage from scripture. 4. Put yourself into different characters in the biblical scene: Feel the feelings, imagine the locale, etc. 5. Reflect.

Eucharistic Adoration: Some very holy people adopt a very simple approach to the spiritual life: It centers around spending time in the presence of the Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament. We have a 24/7 oratory here at Holy Family. We also have a tabernacle in our old church or “chapel.”

Icons, and other sacred art: Among Orthodox Christians, there is the tradition of using sacred images of the New and Old Testaments, and of the Church, to meditate on and us for prayer. In general, some people may find themselves better able to pray with a visual aid like a crucifix.

The Daily Examen: The daily examen is one of the most ancient prayer forms of the church. It is designed to help one see how God is working in our lives in the course of a day. Get comfortable to pray. Remind yourself that you are in God’s presence. Review the events of the day: Ask Yourself: A. What has been positive today? B. What has been negative today? Ask God for forgiveness. Remind yourself of his continued healing power in your life. Thank God for His continued presence in your life.

Journalling: To be able to be reflective about the journey of our life is part of what a healthy prayer life is about. A habit of journaling can help us to do that.

Now, having talked about WHAT PRAYER IS from the words of Jesus and THEN some ideas about GETTING STARTED IN PRAYER and then SOME IDEAS ON HOW TO PRAY , including most of the great strands of prayer traditions from the Christian experience in the past....now a few words on PROBLEMS/ROADBLOCKS or ISSUES one MIGHT face in prayer.

Dry Times in Prayer

One thing to watch out for in prayer is our worrying that we aren’t connecting to God or “don’t know how to pray” because we don’t “feel” anything at times in our prayer.

However, let’s remember that one can be very close to God and still not always “feel” that closeness....Indeed, C.S. Lewis, who was the best-selling author on Christian topics of the twentieth century, wrote a very interesting personal reflection on his prayer life to God after the death of his wife, Joy, in his book A Grief Observed in 1961. He initially wrote:

“Where is God?...to go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and the sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that silence. You may as well turn away....”

But then he writes that one day,

“... Something quite unexpected...happened....For various reasons...my heart was lighter than it had been for many weeks. For one thing, I suppose I am recovering physically from a good deal of mere exhaustion. ... And

suddenly, at the very moment when, so far, I mourned J. least, I remembered her best. And so, perhaps, with God. I have gradually come to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted. Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like the drowning man who can't be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear.

On the other hand, 'Knock and it shall be opened.' But does knocking mean hammering and kicking the door like a maniac? And there's also 'To him that hath shall be given.' After all, you must have a capacity to receive, or even omnipotence can't give. Perhaps your own passion temporarily destroys the capacity. ... How far have I got? Just as far, I think, as a widower of another sort who would stop, leaning on his spade, and say in answer to the inquiry, 'Thank'ee. Mustn't grumble. I do miss her something dreadful. But they say these things are sent to try us.' We have come to the same point; he with his spade, and I, who am not now much good at digging, with my own instrument. But of course, one must take 'sent to try us' in the right way. God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn't.

Also, Mother Teresa of Calcutta reported long periods of time when she felt nothing in prayer, even though from the time she was a little, little girl, through when she was forty years old, she had always had a very, very intimate relationship with Jesus in prayer.

Many of us have had times when we felt like nothing was happening in our prayer. And it is only honest that sometimes we have really struggled with God's response to us. Sometimes situations in life can keep us closed to feeling the presence of God.

One thing to remember, though, is that God is at work even if we do not realize it: For God is never on vacation. Of course this is never easy to do....think again of C.S. Lewis and his struggles.... But it is helpful if we can think back on a time when we felt unsure how God was at work in our lives, and then to recall how, much later, that it seemed God had given us an answer. I know that in my life, if I hang in there and keep trying to love God and neighbor, and keep trying to follow the moral code of the Church, even when I feel terrible, eventually I find that God was at work and that God even made me a better person through my tough time.

But we all have our tough moments....so let's not think that if we aren't experiencing a sense of God's presence, or if we don't get what we pray for (to save a loved one from illness, to get a job, etc.) – let's not cause us to think that God is not at work among us. Think how on the cross said to the Father, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me" even while the Father was preparing the Resurrection for the Son.

Another way to look at God answering our prayer would be to remember that if we want to have the ultimate, fool-proof detector of God being in our life, it would be that we are GROWING IN LOVE, not that we are healthy, wealthy or feeling sky-high. Indeed, if we look at Mother Teresa as a specific example, while she sometimes felt far from God in her prayer, she was FILLED WITH LOVE FOR OTHER PEOPLE and made THE WHOLE WORLD feel closer to God through her loving actions and her faith. So, wasn't that a PROOF that God was at work in her life even while she felt far from God at times??? Yes. And the same is true for us.

Do I fear that God doesn't want to see me until I have gotten my act together?

In order to be people who truly let their faith guide their lives and hearts we need to bring who we truly are to God. Sometimes our block in doing this may be that we feel that God does not want to see imperfection in us, and we want to only give God "praise" and "thanks". Sometimes we may even get caught up in the idea that "I've got to clean up my act, then I can have a relationship with God". Writer Kathleen Norris speaks of this:

I have lately realized that what went wrong for me in my Christian upbringing is centered in the belief that one had to be dressed up, both outwardly and inwardly, to meet God, the insidious notion that I need to be a firm and even cheerful believer before I dare show my face in "His" church. Such a God was of little use to me in adolescence...and I simply stopped going to church when I could no longer be "good", which.... meant not breaking rules, not giving voice to anger or resentment, and not complaining.

Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York, Harper & Row, 1996), pp 90-91.

And as the Christian writer C.S. Lewis once wrote on prayer in the book *Letters to Malcolm*:
LAY BEFORE HIM WHAT IS IN US, NOT WHAT OUGHT TO BE IN US. GOD ALREADY KNOWS WHAT IS IN OUR HEARTS. THERE IS NO USE PRESENTING A SANITIZED VERSION OF OURSELVES TO GOD, OR IN NOT EXPRESSING OUR FRUSTRATIONS OR WORRIES OR BURDENS TO GOD. THE PROPHETS, AND THE WRITERS OF THE PSALMS, INDEED, THE LORD JESUS HIMSELF, ALL EXPRESSED THEIR TRUE FEELINGS, EVEN FRUSTRATIONS TO GOD THE FATHER. WE CAN DO THE SAME.

God loves us – but He loves us too much to leave us as we are

Sometimes what blocks us from bringing who we are to God may be our own fear of being challenged. Any relationship with God will, indeed, have to do with honestly bringing our own sin into our own clear view, and facing our brokenness.

As Thomas Merton once said to be careful of making friends with the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit is going to ask you to die! And he was referring to the death of “the false self”—the self that does not know how to love others and God. Jesus spoke of this dying often in his ministry—that not only would he die on the cross, but that all of his disciples would have to die to themselves in order to experience new life of the Spirit. This is the reason we say that, in baptism, the new Christian “dies” to sin in order to “rise” to new life in the family of the church.

This “death” of the false self won’t come easily. But with the help of God and other people of faith we can grow into the disciples we are called to be!

It would help me become a person of prayer if I cultivated the gift of gratitude.

Being thankful is important if we want to become people of prayer.

I heard once that one mark of true spiritual growth is gratitude. Gratitude for what we have in our lives. This is not to be confused with repressing or hiding our sadness, anger or resentments because Christians are supposed to be “grateful”. It is simply the notion that as we grow in our relationship with God and God’s people, we will focus less on what others lack, or what we lack, and will spend more energy on loving people for who they are (unless they are abusive) and in loving ourselves for who we are as well. It also may be the only way we will survive as a disciple. It is also instructive to realize that the New Testament asks those who follow Jesus to be “thankful” over two hundred times.

I remember talking once to a young woman who said that, on a half-day retreat once, she had had the most wonderful experience involving reminding herself of what she was thankful for. She said that, going into the retreat she was stressed and worried about a lot of things, and not too happy, but that the program began with some quiet time where each participant was to spend fifteen minutes in silence writing down all the things that they were thankful for, and she thought of all those things, and afterwards she felt so refreshed. That might be an exercise for each of us to try for ourselves.

And yet, what if we do not feel grateful? So often we are told, when we are frustrated or doubtful, that we must “have faith”, but what if we do not seem to have that faith? One thing to remember is that everybody struggles with his or her lives of faith and following Jesus.

So our faith, and I believe specifically, our Catholic Christian faith, give us something by which we will not be shielded from pain in the world, but with which we can grow and have hope and love DESPITE the pain of the world – rather than growing bitter.

Maybe it is in the very troubles that people in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and the saints of our church have faced and survived that we can gain a perspective on working for the Kingdom of God today—to give us hope in the face of massive problems. Certainly faith in the resurrection of Jesus gives one a perspective on hope that says that there is never a reason not to have hope.

Or, as St. Paul writes to the Romans (Romans 8:28): *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God who are called according to his purpose.*

I Need to Grow in My Love of Neighbor In Order to Become Prayerful

Jesus told his followers that they could know God through serving those who are in need: the hungry or thirsty or homeless or sick or imprisoned or lonely, etc. And to be someone who helps others can actually be a WAY TO FIND GOD IN OUR LIVES.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta also once related a story about a woman who met Jesus in the suffering:

A few weeks ago there was a French girl from Paris University here. She is working on her Ph.D.

Suddenly she comes and tells me, "I have found Jesus". I said, "Where did you find Jesus?" "In the home for the dying."

And I said, "What did you do when you found Jesus?" "I went to confession and communion." It had been 15 years since she last did this. And I said, "What else did you do?" "I sent a telegram to my parents to tell them I found Jesus." All the way from Paris ... then contact with these people (in the home) and she found Jesus.

So, our own connection to God can sometimes happen through our LOVE FOR and SERVICE TO OTHERS: As we hear in Isaiah 58:6-9:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

Or, as C.S. Lewis quite succinctly says in his book Letters to Malcolm:

"It is much easier to pray for a bore than to visit him."

I need to become aware of what is here and now in my life to become prayerful

Have you ever entered a room, and had someone ask you "How are you doing today?" by someone who looked over your shoulder to other people behind you? What was the difference between that and someone who stopped what they were doing, turned, and looked right at us? The difference is that one is dim, and one is aware. The same is true in the spiritual life. God may be working all around us through people, nature, church services, etc., but if we are not aware of our own negative patterns of thought, for example, or are preoccupied with issues of the past or possible issues of the future, we may miss God working in our lives right now.

To become aware means to look attentively at the world around oneself, and also to learn to be aware of ones own self. Sometimes we may also be too busy in our minds to let ourselves be aware of what is going on around us. Here are some exercises to help us look attentively:

BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN BREATHING: Sit comfortably and breathe in and out very slowly perhaps repeating to yourself, "I am breathing in the Holy Spirit, I am breathing out my worries and anxieties."

BODY EXERCISE:

1. Relax, get into a comfortable position—feet flat on the ground, hands out on thighs. Maybe use the breathing exercise above.
2. Be aware of how your shirt feels on your shoulders, be aware of any sensations in your shoulders. Now your back. Now your hands, feel what they feel. Now your thighs. Your feet—feel them inside your shoes. Shoulders, back, hands, thighs, feet. Over again. Now slowly open your eyes.

IF NEGATIVE EMOTIONS ARE PULLING YOU TO ANGER OR REGRET ABOUT THE PAST OR ANXIETY ABOUT THE FUTURE...FLOAT THOSE AWAY!

If a lot of negative feelings are going through your mind, **FLOAT THEM AWAY ACROSS THE SEA!** Imagine yourself sitting on a seawall dangling your legs into a warm sea. Begin to put your problems (people, situations, feelings, things, memories) onto boats that float away across the sea until they disappear on the horizon and then there is a beautiful sunset. When the boats are all gone, stand up out of the water and dive in, realizing that you the water and it's filled with beautiful stuff—corals, tropical fish, jewels, you name it. Then

get back up out of the water and stand up on the seawall and there is Jesus, and He gives you an embrace, like an embrace you haven't had in a while, and he tells you that all those negative things are just floating on the surface of who God made you to be, and don't change who you really are: The adopted son or daughter of God.

Distractions and Prayer

It is important that we don't ADD to our distractions during prayer by becoming overly idealistic that we can somehow keep all non-prayerful thoughts from our mind during prayer, or to be too hard on ourselves if we are, indeed, distracted by other thoughts at times. After all, we are all human and being distracted, at times, is normal.

Indeed, the Catholic Catechism advises us to be gentle in turning away from distractions in prayer, and says not to be overly vigilant or tough on ourselves. It says: "To set about hunting down distractions would be to fall into their trap, when all that is necessary is to turn back to our heart: for a distraction reveals to us what we are attached to, and this humble awareness before the Lord should awaken our preferential love for Him and lead us resolutely to offer Him our heart to be purified. Therein lies the battle, the choice of which master to serve." — par. 2729

St. Teresa of Avila said: "Never address your words to God while you are thinking of something else." God is worthy of our full attention. It's admirable to pray as we work or while we drive or do other things — as long as we make the Lord's presence central.

St. Edmund tells us, "It is better to say one Our Father fervently and devoutly than a thousand with no devotion and full of distraction."

There are times when the source of our distraction is another person — someone in church whose restlessness or activity makes it hard for us to pray. St. Thérèse of Lisieux wrote of such an experience in her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*: "For a long time I had to kneel during meditation near a Sister who could not stop fidgeting. I kept quiet, bathed in perspiration often enough, while my prayer was nothing more than the prayer of suffering! In the end I tried to find some way of bearing it peacefully and joyfully, at least in my inmost heart."

As St. Thérèse of Lisieux stated, "I have many distractions, but as soon as I am aware of them, I pray for those people, the thought of whom is diverting my attention. In this way, they reap the benefit of my distractions." Talking to Him in a very loving and comfortable way, just as we would with any other friend or loved one, can be a helpful means of overcoming distractions.

Something You Might Try

·St. Teresa of Avila suggests that, at the beginning of prayer, we close our eyes "in order to open wider the eyes of the soul," thereby lessening the chance of distractions.

And St. Francis of Assisi, whenever he was about to enter church for Mass or to pray, would say, "Worldly and frivolous thoughts, stay here at the door until I return." Then he would go inside and pray.

In the end, follow the prayer style/technique/regimen that HELPS YOU TO LOVE GOD AND NEIGHBOR and which you can pray MOST SINCERELY

Indeed, when someone asked Blessed Jordan of Saxony the best form of prayer, he said, "The way in which you can pray most fervently."

And there was a teaching story from the 19th c. Jewish community recorded Elie Wiesel's book Souls on Fire about a man who worked on a farm and would come to the town market every day to sell his vegetables. And each day he would pray his prayers from his prayer book at noon. Well, as the story goes, one day he forgot to bring his prayer book and, aghast, looked up to the heavens, to God, and said, "I am so sorry God, I have forgotten my prayer book...But I will pray EVERY LETTER OF THE ALPHABET THREE TIMES with great devotion to cover my prayers." So he did that, and, as the story goes, at the end of the day God stood up in heaven with all of his angels and pointed to that man and said, "His was the best prayer I heard all day today."

So, prayer: It will please God if it is, in the end, a sincere cry from you to love God with all of your heart, soul and mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself.