



Don't Just Pray, Make Your Life a Prayer

Everybody prays

All religions have one thing in common...prayer. There is a god out there or up there and we are down here. So, in order to reach their god, people have to pray. People In every religion can be seen looking up to the sky with hands folded "talking to god", whoever that god happens to be.

Prayer tells the god, as though the god is unaware and oblivious, what a person needs or what someone else needs. Prayer is also used to tell the god thank you for being great and awesome. Prayer can be freeform, just talking to the god. Prayer can also be formal words of prayer given by the religion. These formal prayers are memorized and repeated often, because the god likes them.

Jesus' disciples already knew how to pray. Their Jewish heritage meant they grew up praying to God and likely memorized many formal Jewish prayers. Yet, there was something different about the way Jesus prayed. Jesus' disciples watched Jesus pray. What they really observed, however, was the effect of His prayer. Jesus had a personal and continuous relationship to God which their prayers didn't give them. So, one of them requested "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). The disciples weren't looking for mere words, they already had words of prayer. What they didn't have was prayer that gave them a relationship to God that Jesus had. This is what they really wanted.

Prayer and swimming

Prayer can be likened to going to a swimming pool. Depending on how it's approached, the experience can be very different.

Prayer is easy, in the sense of telling God what we want Him to do, blessing food or mindlessly reciting formal prayers from memory. Prayer of this sort is like walking up to a swimming pool, dipping a toe into the water, then going back to relax in the lounge chair. It would still be correct to say "I went to the pool today", but the full experience was missed. Prayer which only touches the surface of the water is limited in its effect. For the toe-dipper, the water can't completely cool and refresh the entire body. To the other swimmers, the small ripples emanating from a toe gently tapped into the pool are hardly noticeable.

Before I could glide through the water swimming, I first learned to doggie paddle. Doggie paddling allowed me to experience the fullness of the water, go through the motions of swimming and stay afloat. But I didn't get very far very fast. I still told people I could swim. Prayer approached as an obligation to religious life is like doggie paddling. There are a lot of motions and the doggie-paddler can feel good about being in the water, but they don't get very far. Attending Mass only as a weekly obligation would be an example. Going through the motions of the Mass and mindlessly repeating prayers while daydreaming about the rest of the day can feel like swimming in religion. But the real effect and power of the Mass is never experienced. Being seen at Mass every week gives a good appearance to others of being religious as well. The Pharisees were doggie-paddlers, going through motions and appearing religious. The doggie-paddler makes bigger ripples than the toe-dipper, but the ripples still have little effect on other swimmers.

Prayer is not "talking to God". Prayer approached in such a menial manner as talking to God will never lead to anything more than doggie paddling and staying afloat. Prayer is a connection with God, being one in mind and spirit with Him. This is the prayer Jesus had and His disciples wanted Him to teach. True prayer is being completely submerged in the water, going deep and being surrounded by all the water's glory. Prayer is doing a cannon ball into the water. The jumper becomes fully submerged and surrounded by the water. The water itself is splashed onto everyone in the vicinity and causes waves which reach swimmers at the other end of the pool.

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Calling upon the name of the LORD

In the Garden of Eden, mankind lived in close communion with God and God commonly walked about in the Garden (Genesis 3:8). There is something that only recently struck me...it seems as though it took over two hundred years from the creation of mankind for people to pray and call upon the name of the LORD. (LORD, in all capitals, is used in English translations as a reference to God's proper name, Yahweh.)

I was astonished the last time I read Genesis chapter four. The chapter concludes with the birth of Adam's first grandchild, Enosh. The final verse of the chapter reads "At that time people began to invoke the LORD by name" (Genesis 4:26). This was about 240 years after creation, by estimation of theologians. Looking back in Scripture, it's true. Nowhere does Adam or Eve ever call out to God to initiate a conversation either prior to or after their sin. Neither does Cain nor Abel call upon the LORD. The only time anyone talked to God is when He spoke to them first.

Calling upon the name of the LORD became very important in prayer and worship. "Give thanks unto the LORD, call upon his name" (Psalm 105:1). By the time Enosh was born there were many false gods in the world. Cain had left the Lord's presence long before the birth of Enosh, so Cain's offspring never knew the one true God. This meant the followers of the one true God must distinguish Him from other gods by using His proper title. "I am the LORD; that is my name and my glory I will not give to another" (Isaiah 42:7).

Thus, after over two-hundred years, mankind's first dip into the pool with God was to specifically call upon His name for petitions, intercessions and thanksgiving.

Our Father in Heaven

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus began His prayer "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:36). Jesus brought to the world a new dimension for mankind's relationship with God. "Abba" is an Aramaic term for "father", conveying intimacy, respect and trust. The term is actually more like "daddy". The Apostles carried this concept forward and later Paul wrote "Because you are children, God sent out the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, 'Abba, Father!'" (Galatians 4:6)

With Jesus, mankind's relationship with God changed. It went from being distant and formal to being personal and intimate. This is what the disciples were looking for...not words of prayer but a relationship to the Father through prayer. This new relationship with the Father is very important, but shouldn't be taken to extremes. As Jesus came to fulfill the law but not abolish the old law, Jesus came to fulfill mankind's relationship with God but not abolish the old relationship.

God is not our friend. Friends are equal and we are not God's equal. The Father is not our friend. He is our Creator, Sustainer and Master of life. Jesus is not our friend. Jesus is our Savior and Master. The Holy Spirit is not our friend. The Holy Spirit is our director, helper and Master. God is still above us. To see God as anything less is to disrespect Him and His nature. It takes away the awe and wonder of having the privilege of being in a relationship with the Almighty God and Creator of all.

God is not our "co-pilot". If God is in the co-pilot's seat, change seats. It is for God to fly the plane and set the course. It is for us to follow Him. Then, when we get to the destination, we give Him praise and thanksgiving whether it was our destination of choice or not.

To whom should we pray

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The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one. In theory, it shouldn't matter to whom we pray or if we just pray to "God". However, Jesus taught us how to properly pray and we should follow the instruction of our Lord Jesus.

Pray to the Father. When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, He began "Our Father in Heaven" (Matthew 6:9). Jesus and the Father are one (John 10:30), yet Jesus still submitted to the Father. Jesus came down from Heaven "not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus showed His submission to the Father's will by asking the Father if there could be a way other than crucifixion, ending His prayer with "not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:42). All our prayers should begin and end just as Jesus taught.

When we say we want to do "God's will", it is the Father's will we seek. We don't seek the will of Jesus, because Jesus submits His will to the Father. We don't seek the will of the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and His will (John 14:16).

Many don't realize it, but even the Mass is a prayer directed to the Father, not Jesus. Pay close attention to all the prayers at Mass and see. The Concluding Doxology of the Eucharistic prayer is the high point of the Mass. This prayer is directed to the Father..."Through Him (Jesus), with Him (Jesus), in Him (Jesus), in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever." AMEN! (My personal favorite prayer of the Mass.)

Pray through the Son. "Through Him (Jesus), with Him (Jesus), in Him (Jesus)...This is how we pray. Jesus said "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The goal of prayer is to reach the Father, and Jesus is the way to the Father. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus on the cross we can unite to the Father in eternity. Through faith in Jesus, we become adopted children of the Father and can unite to the Father in prayer as Jesus did.

This verse of Scripture specifically confirms: a) being a good person is not the way to the Father and b) praying to "God" through other religions is not a way to the Father. To clarify, it doesn't mean everyone in every other religion is doomed to eternal death. The Church teaches "Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved" (Lumen Gentium, 14). To be specific, those who have not had the opportunity to know the truth about Jesus and His Church, as well as those who have been taught falsely about the Church, can still be saved by God's mercy and enlightenment at death. Either before death or at the moment of death, Christ reveals to every person the truth about Himself and His Church. Those who accept it will be saved and those who reject it will not be saved. This is why the Church compels us to pray for the salvation of everyone, including those who worship in false religions.

Pray in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit plays a profound and essential role in prayer. The Holy Spirit acts as an intercessor and guide to prayer. "The Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought" (Romans 8:26). Paul exhorts believers to "pray in the Spirit at all times, with every kind of prayer and petition" (Ephesians 6:18). Praying in the Spirit doesn't imply praying in "tongues" as some believe. Tongues is simply a form of prayer given by the Spirit at a specific moment of time for edification of the Church. Praying in the Spirit means prayer should be in accord with the Father's will and should serve the Father's purpose. Praying in the Spirit involves submission to the Spirit's wisdom and discernment in prayer.

Don't pray to "God". One might say "I can pray to God anywhere", but what god is that? One might say "God is in my heart", but what god is that? Praying to "God" is distant, impersonal and doesn't even imply the prayer is directed to the LORD our God. Even the Old Testament exhorts believers to call upon the name of the LORD. Call

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upon the Father. Call upon Jesus and use His holy name. Call upon the Holy Spirit. In this way, we personally connect to the LORD our God. With our heart connected specifically to Him, He is more able to transform us and unite us to Him.

It's not that God refuses to hear us if we use an incorrect formula. Rather, a personal and intimate relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit cannot be obtained with impersonal prayer.

Mary's role in prayer

When there is an important need, we often ask others to pray for us. Others might ask us to pray for them when they have an important need. This is called intercessory prayer. This is the role of Mary (and the Saints).

The Church does not and never has taught Catholics to pray to Mary. "This very special devotion differs essentially from the adoration which is given to the incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit" (Catechism, 971). Mary is only given devotion, not worship or adoration.

"When we pray to her [Mary], we are adhering with her to the plan of the Father" (Catechism, 2679). The *Hail Mary* is called a prayer, yet in reality is simply a request for Mary to intercede for us... "Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners". This is all we ask. It isn't that Mary or the Saints have power to change the Father's will. They are perfectly united to the Father, so will pray in the Holy Spirit and in the perfect will of the Father.

If one truly believes in everlasting life, then one must believe Mary and the Saints are living and capable of intercessory prayer. Being already perfected and in a state of grace in Heaven, their prayers can be far more effective than the prayers of anyone on earth who is still a sinner and working on perfection.

Defining prayer

Once again, prayer must not be considered as simply talking to God. "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God" (Catechism, 2559). "Prayer is the living relationship of the children of God with their Father who is good beyond measure, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit" (Catechism, 2565).

Prayer includes petitions, intercessions, thanksgiving and praise. However, prayer is much more and is most effective when one does a cannon-ball into the deep end.

Forms of prayer

There are three major expressions of prayer: vocal, meditative and contemplative. Each has its own purpose and all forms of prayer should be employed by Christians seeking a living relationship with God.

Vocal prayer raises one's thoughts and words to the Father for the purpose of petitions, intercessions, thanksgiving and praise. Vocal prayer can also be kept in one's thoughts. Praying silently is appropriate and considerate of others when in public places. Vocal prayer can be formal, such as the Lord's Prayer, but also spontaneous from the heart.

Meditation is prayer which seeks understanding of God's mind and heart. Meditation is above all a quest. One seeks to understand the why and how of Christian life in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking. In the parable of the sower (Mark 4:4-7), only the seed which fell on fertile ground produced fruit. Meditation is spreading fertilizer on the ground of one's heart and mind so the good seed can produce fruit. Meditation is often performed with an aid such as Scripture or a spiritual book. The key to meditation is not in the reading, but in the quiet time which follows the reading. There, one seeks the Lord to speak to their heart and "Tell me what I ought to do." Reading without quiet time is learning, but not meditation. It gains knowledge, but not understanding.

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Contemplation is prayer of silence and fixing on Jesus. Contemplation asks nothing of God and seeks nothing except complete union with God. Contemplation is giving Jesus the opportunity to speak. In contemplation, we listen rather than talk. One must set specific and uninterrupted time for contemplation. It cannot happen with distraction. Contemplation requires a firm determination not to give up when God cannot be heard or when thoughts enter the mind to distract from God. "Contemplation is taking time to be alone with Him who we know loves us" (Saint Theresa).

Approach to prayer

Prayer requires forgiveness. "First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). Before prayer can be effective and pleasing to God there must be forgiveness of others and reconciliation wherever possible. How often are the words "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" recited while a grudge is held against another person? If prayers aren't being answered, maybe the problem isn't God, maybe the problem is unforgiveness. After all, if we ask God to forgive us as we forgive others and we don't forgive, what should we expect?

Prayer requires sincerity. How often are the words "Give us this day our daily bread" recited while seeking or storing up riches and worldly goods? If God does bless our prosperity, it is only for the purpose of sharing with others. "Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise" (Luke 3:11). How is it possible for anyone who prays the Lord's Prayer to preach or believe in a Prosperity Gospel for personal gain?

Prayer requires humility. See the parable of the tax collector (Luke 19:9-14). The tax collector prayed but was not justified before God because of pride and arrogance.

Prayer requires perseverance. See the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). The widow had to keep praying in order to obtain what she wanted. God may not jump into action immediately at every prayer. Just because God doesn't give us something the first time we ask doesn't mean the answer is always going to be no. "I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry" (Psalm 40:2).

Prayer is a battle. Prayer isn't always easy. Emotions and random thoughts entering into the mind tend to distract prayer. It can be difficult at times to focus. Fortunately, our Father understands us and accepts the humanity He gave us...as long as we sincerely try. We also need to battle our spiritual enemies who try to turn us away from prayer. Temptation to believe there is no time for prayer, or God doesn't hear our prayer, must be overcome. Tireless fervor in prayer comes from love of God and trust in His love.

Making life a prayer

To make life a prayer means to go beyond thinking of prayer as just an action of a moment in time where one is talking or listening to God. To have a life of prayer is to look beyond token prayers and empty words to be immersed in the presence of God at all times. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Unceasing prayer may sound impossible, but with God all things are possible.

The mind may not always be thinking prayerful thoughts. The mouth may not always be proclaiming the glory of God. Responsibilities in life such as work, family and relaxation enter the forefront of consciousness and need to be handled with dedicated thought and care. However, when life is a prayer, an ongoing personal connection with God, everything becomes a prayer. Beyond conscious thought, every word and action in every moment can be approached prayerfully to give glory to God. "Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of

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the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). The Holy Spirit, who teaches us how to pray, can make prayer unceasing. Unceasing prayer is making life a prayer.

When life is a prayer, the Lord's Prayer becomes more than a repetition of mere words. It becomes life itself. It means:

Actively working to bring God's Kingdom to the world, not just saying "Thy Kingdom come".

Accepting God's will in everything that happens in life, not just saying "Thy will be done".

Seeking only life's necessities and being generous with the excess, not just asking for daily bread.

Immediately forgiving those who trespass against us, not just asking God to forgive us.

Avoiding sinful places and situations, not just asking God to deliver us from evil.

When life is a prayer, prayer isn't an afterthought. Time is reserved to commune with God. Morning prayers can be a time to dedicate oneself and the day to God. Evenings can include time for reflection, meditation and examination of conscience. For people with busy lives, the Church recommends a minimum of fifteen minutes of prayer daily. It's not a lot and makes a big difference in one's spiritual life. The closer one is united to God the more one desires to pray.

A life of prayer means finding prayer time in the activities or events of the day. Chores such as laundry and mowing the lawn don't require dedicated thought. Times like these are great times to offer petitions or intercessory prayer. Personally, my own time spent mowing the lawn no longer includes headphones and music. Instead, it's a couple hours of interceding for others by repeating the *Jesus Prayer* ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a poor sinner) over and over while meditating on the cross. Long car drives can be a good time for listening to podcasts such as the *Diary of Saint Faustina* or the *Stations of the Cross*. Speaking of car time...try praying for the salvation of every driver who "trespasses against us" on the road. After a while, anger towards other drivers simply disappears.

The ultimate in a life of prayer is offering up pain and suffering to the Father for the salvation of others. This was Jesus' ultimate act of love for us. We can never be more like Jesus and united to Jesus than when we use our own pain, suffering and persecution as a prayer for the salvation of others. This is very hard to do. Nobody wants to suffer. Pain draws all our attention upon ourself and our own woes. It's okay to ask the Father to be spared of pain, just like Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane. But like Jesus, we accept the Father's will if the pain and suffering can benefit someone needing salvation.

Finally, a life of prayer doesn't mean throwing up one's hands and giving everything to God. We pray and we work. We are His hands and feet in this world. This leads me to my favorite saying about prayer: "Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you" (Catechism, 2834, as quoted from Saint Ignatius of Loyola).