

The practice of contemplative prayer

21 July 2024

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Today we're talking about **prayer**.

What do you think prayer is?

Prayer is simply talking with God, sharing what's on our mind and listening to what God might say to us.

Who can pray? Anyone, anytime, any place

Is there one way that we need to pray? Lots of ways of praying

Does God like long prayers?

Maybe, maybe not. Jesus' model prayer is quite short.

I think God wants us to listen just as much as talk when we pray.

Let us pray ...

BIBLE READING

Speak to us, O Lord, through your word

Our ears and hearts are open

[Psalm 63:1-7 \(responsively\)](#)

You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;

**I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.**

I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.

**Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.**

I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.

**I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.**

On my bed I remember you;

I meditate on you through the watches of the night.

**Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.**

Mark 1:35-39

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out evil spirits.

Matthew 6:5–8

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

For the word of God in Scripture,
for the word of God among us,
for the word of God within us,
thanks be to God.

MESSAGE The practice of contemplative prayer

When we think of the practice of prayer ... where do we begin?

We might begin by recognising that there are different types of prayer suited to varying contexts. Public prayer during a worship service is quite different to a one-on-one prayer with a sick or dying person, which is different again from how we pray by ourselves.



This morning I want to focus on contemplative prayer, which seeks to draw us close to God and rest in God’s presence.

Again, when we think of this narrower type of prayer, where do we begin?

The practices of Jesus seem like a good place to start.

We know that Jesus prayed regularly, and had a habit of rising early and going off by himself to a solitary place to pray, as suggested in the reading from Mark’s Gospel.





The way Jesus prayed seems to have been noticed by the disciples as being somewhat different to the prayer practices of the day, which were based on set prayers repeated at set times during the day.

The disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray like he does. Jesus' response is what we know as the Lord's prayer.

While we are very familiar with this prayer, we might note that it's really quite **short** and easy to remember. It's split into two roughly equal parts – praise of God, and then some requests asking God to provide for our daily needs, protect us from evil and forgive us when we slip up.

As our foundational prayer, we use it both in public worship and in private.

I often pray this prayer before I get up out of bed in the morning.

In Matthew's Gospel, the words of the Lord's prayer are preceded by other advice –

don't think that God will be pleased with us for using lots of fancy words when we pray, for God knows what we need before we even ask.

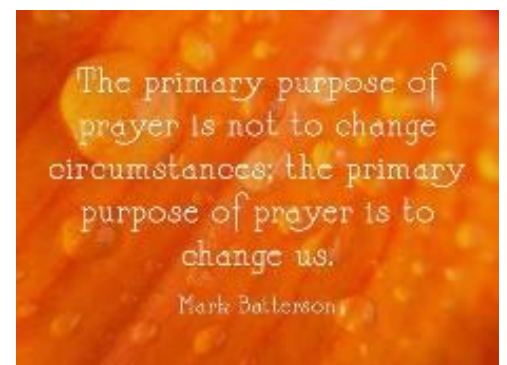
If that is the case, we might wonder why we need to pray at all or why we need to use words when we pray.

We might also ponder what the purpose of prayer really is ...

... is it for God's benefit to learn what needs fixing in the world?

... or is it more about changing us and our attitudes and helping us to put our trust in God?

At its heart, contemplative prayer is more about changing us, so it makes sense for this type of prayer to be focused on the person and character of God ... who God is, what God is like. Many of the psalms take this approach.



The psalm that we read earlier, that is attributed to David,

has its setting in the wilderness when David was on the run from a murderous King Saul.

David is earnestly seeking God's presence and protection. As he meditates on the character of God – God's love and power and glory – David is drawn to praise and thankfulness and inner joy. David's situation may be bleak but his prayer refocuses his mind and his spirit on who God is and how dependable and loving God's help is. One imagines David finishing this prayer experience with both peace and joy in his heart and able to enjoy a restful night's sleep.

So what might we take from the approach of Jesus and the approach of David?

First, prayer doesn't need lots of fancy words.

It doesn't really need many words at all.

It's more about seeking God and focusing on God.

Contemplative prayer needs quiet and solitude, getting away from people and external noise and the numerous demands on our attention.

But how might we free ourselves from the many inner thoughts and distractions that are in our heads for much of the day?

I'd like to offer you two ways of praying that help us slow down and remind us of who God is. One way is called breath prayer which we can use throughout the day to remind us of God. The other is called centering prayer which helps us clear our minds and, as the name suggests, centre our thoughts on the character of God. Let's see how both of these might work.



Breath prayer, as the name suggests, gets us to focus on our breathing, which we are often not conscious of. As we close our eyes we can feel breath coming into our lungs, being held and then exhaled. As we focus attention on our breathing we can slow it down. Breathe in and breathe out.

We're also reminded that the biblical word for breath is the same as the word for spirit. So as we breathe in and out we might imagine ourselves being filled with God's life-giving Spirit.

A breath prayer is a short prayer, half of which we pray as we breathe in, the other half of which we pray as we breathe out.

A classic breath prayer – based on the request of blind Bartimaeus – is this:

*Jesus Christ, Son of God (as we breathe in) ...
... have mercy on me (as we breathe out)*

Let's try. Get comfortable and close your eyes. Focus on breathing in and breathing out, breathing in and breathing out.

Now as you breathe in, pray the words Jesus Christ, Son of God.

As you breathe out, pray the words have mercy on me.

We might repeat this simple prayer three or four times.

This is a prayer that you could pray any time of the day or multiple times during the day ... before you get out of bed in the morning, when you're getting dressed, when you're making a cup of tea or coffee, before you make an important decision.

Others breath prayers include ...

Be still and know ... that I am God

Fill me Spirit ... with your love

Abba Father ... I belong to you

You could make up your own breath prayer from a Bible verse referring to God, as above.

Alternatively, think of your favourite way of addressing God ... this becomes the first part of the prayer. What do you seek? God's peace? Joy? Guidance? ... this becomes the second part of the prayer.

So for instance another breath prayer might be ...

Loving God ... help me trust in you

Centering prayer is another form of contemplative prayer and works in a similar way to breath prayer. It's aim is to help us clear our heads of anxious or urgent thoughts that seem to demand our constant attention, so that we can centre our thoughts on God's presence with us and within us.



As before, we choose a quiet place where we can pray, sit comfortably, close our eyes and be aware of our breathing.

This time, however, we don't pray even a short sentence of a prayer.

Instead, we pray just one word that helps us focus on God.

It could be a name for God or an attribute of God.

For me, one word that I choose to use is grace.

I might pray the word grace a few times and then sit in the quiet.

As my thoughts wander to what I need to buy at the shops, what I need to organise, or the name of the person who said something hurtful ... I repeat my chosen centering word, grace.

Slowly my thoughts quieten down and I can begin to sense or hear what God is saying to me in the stillness of my heart.

To begin, sitting for five minutes in this way will seem like a long time. But as we get more used to this style of prayer, five minutes can become ten or even twenty minutes.

At the end of the time, we will find that our heart is more at rest, the anxious thoughts have gone and we can face the rest of the day with inner confidence and peace.

When I'm having a fitful sleep and tossing and turning at 3 in the morning worried about something or other, I use a variation of this type of prayer to help clear away those anxious thoughts and get back to sleep.

If you want to try this type of prayer, spend a week or so choosing a word that will help you focus on God's character and presence and then give it a try.

One more type of contemplative prayer before I finish.

I call this my walking prayer, where I combine walking with praying.

As many of you probably know I like to be active, and walking is one of my favourite activities. Towards the end of my day, while it is still light, I like to go for a walk around our neighbourhood. Depending on the weather and how much time I have, this walk might take 10 minutes or 20 or even half an hour.



Often there are issues or people in my thoughts as I begin the walk – the unfinished business of the day. I may have been preparing a message for Sunday or thinking about a meeting coming up or even about some issue in the world. I perhaps want God's guidance or the trust to leave the situation in God's hands.

So I begin my walk and take in the clouds and trees and people out walking their dogs. I notice the birds calling and which flowers are in bloom and pray my thanks to God.

I then offer up to God what is weighing on my heart and continue on my walk.

I'm not sure how it all comes together, but usually by the end of the walk I feel exercised, I feel thankful for where I live and for God's creation and very often the impasse or anxiety I was carrying at the end of the day has gone and I can relax into the evening.

If you don't like walking, perhaps spend 10 minutes in the garden or time while knitting or whatever. But take the time to give over your worries to God and be thankful for the blessings of the day.

I'll stop there. Hopefully I've given you a few ways that might expand your life of prayer and help you become more aware of God's loving presence around you and within you.