

Jesus Prayer – From “Community of Christ”

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The Jesus Prayer is also known as the Prayer of the Heart. Rather than praying with just the head, the prayer of the heart seeks to engage the whole human person in prayer. By repeating a phrase from scripture over and over, the practitioner bypasses the distracting activity of mental prayer to commune with God in the quiet inner places hidden deep inside their beings.

The Practice

Before you begin, choose which version of the Jesus Prayer feels right for you. The traditional form of the Jesus Prayer appropriates the petition of the beggar on the road to Jericho, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God (or Son of David), have mercy on me, a sinner.” However, shorter phrases that focus on the name of Jesus and the desire for God’s mercy are more appropriate. “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me;” or “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me;” or “Jesus, have mercy on me” capture the essence of the prayer and are easily adapted to the rhythm of one’s breathing. Simply invoking the name “Jesus” or the single word “mercy” (as in Centering Prayer) are also recommended alternatives.

Find a comfortable prayer–meditation position. Let your breathing become relaxed and easy. Without forcing it, allow the rhythm of your breath to gradually slow and deepen. By paying attention to your breath, you promote a quiet, interior awareness. With practice, you can become quiet enough to sense your heart beating without even taking your pulse!

Let the words “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” (or an alternative phrase, see above) take form in your mind. You might imagine yourself looking into your heart and carrying your thoughts from your head down into your heart.

Gradually fit the words of the prayer to the natural rhythm of your breath. For example, internally say the words “Lord Jesus Christ” as you inhale and “Have mercy on me” as you exhale. Alternatively, you might breathe in with silence and then mentally utter the prayer phrase with each breath out. You can also try softly vocalizing the words.

Remember, this prayer is not intended for rational analysis of content and words. Refrain as best you can from having a conversation with yourself about the words you are saying, their meaning for your life, and so on.

Once the Jesus Prayer establishes itself in your heart you may find, as other practitioners of the prayer have reported, that the prayer will begin to “pray itself” inside you. The words invoking the name of Jesus and God’s compassionate presence may spontaneously surface as you go about daily tasks. You may find yourself repeating them as you do your shopping or while you wait at a stoplight. They may even come to inhabit your dreams. Then you will be praying “without ceasing.”

Continue silently praying the Jesus Prayer together for a minimum of five to ten minutes. The group facilitator will draw the prayer time to a close by sounding a chime or verbally praying a statement of thanks and amen.

Invite people to gradually refocus attention on the group as they end their prayers and open their eyes. Engage in a brief time of sharing about the experience of the Jesus Prayer. What happened? What was helpful and meaningful? What was difficult or frustrating? What are the benefits of the Prayer of the Heart for people seeking deeper discipleship?

Scripture Reflections

Pray without ceasing.—1 Thessalonians 5:17 NRSV

They came to Jericho...Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."— Mark 10:46–49 NRSV

[This is] the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations...Christ in you.—Colossians 1:26–27 NRSV

Additional Resources

The Way of a Pilgrim, translated from Russian by R. M. French

The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry by Henri J. M. Nouwen