

A 1-WEEK SERIES ON

Prayer



Prayer

A DIFFERENT KIND OF CURRICULUM

Ministry Leadership Center Press
Holy Disruptions: Prayer

©2025 Ministry Leadership Center

Published by the Ministry Leadership Center
309 Franklin Road, Brentwood, Tennessee 37027
www.ministryleadership.org

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Website addresses listed in this book were current at the time of publication. Please contact the Ministry Leadership Center via e-mail (info@ministryleadership.org) to report URLs that are no longer operational and replacement URLs will be issued if available.

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WEEK 1

Prayer



Session 1

WEEKLY SESSION SYNOPSIS

This week, you will be talking about prayer and helping young people develop their own thoughts and beliefs on prayer. They've likely already formed an opinion about it and determined whether or not prayer is worth it to them. This session is meant to help young people recognize prayer's importance and challenge their idea of the function of prayer in our spiritual lives. They'll do this through a contemplative practice of the Jesus Prayer.

Session Supplies

- Printed copy of the Jesus Prayer instructions for each student (page 4)
- Printed copy of Theology Together with Friends Rubric (last page with squares)
- A way to play music
- A low, contemplative music playlist (Spotify's Deep Focus playlist is a great resource)

Topic / Theological Lens

Prayer is essential to the Christian life. It places us in communion with God. It is an act of humility that places our being into the hands of the creator through many different functions: thanksgiving, intercession, forgiveness, confession, surrender, and supplication. Many theological angles can be taken when it comes to prayer, but for this lesson, we want to focus on its necessity to the life of a person of faith, how it aligns our person with God, and how that in and of itself transforms us.

Preparing

The Jesus prayer is a contemplative practice. You'll need to be sure your room is set up in a way that allows for this type of practice. Use low, contemplative music in the background. Also, familiarize yourself with the prompts, and make copies of the instructions (on page 4) to hand out to your students. Your students may not like the quiet and silence, but allow them to sit in that space and work through it.

Dilemma– Jesus Prayer

DISORIENTING DILEMMA (10 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

Today, you are going to practice prayer with your group. However, you won't practice just any prayer. You'll practice the Jesus Prayer. It is a simple prayer that dates back to the 5th century with the monastic Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers. It finds its biblical roots in the Book of Luke and the Book of Phillipians. The prayer has a rich history, especially in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. It's a very simple prayer of repentance:

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The prayer should be seen as an act of confession and surrender. We confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and Son of God and surrender to him, the infinite God, for we are finite and in need of salvation. It is not a prayer of ego or power but one of humility. It is a prayer seeking the presence of an infinite God amid our own messy lives.

Now, to practice this with your group, you will need to set up and do the following:

- Set up your meeting space so the environment is conducive to a contemplative, quiet prayer practice.
- If you have access, set up a way to play low, contemplative music for students as they practice the prayer. (Spotify's Deep Focus playlist is a great resource for this.)
- Have students spread out around the room. You'll want them to be on their own for this practice.
- Once they have settled, use the instructions on the next page to get started.
- Allow for 5-7 minutes for this exercise.

Introduction for Students



"Today, we are going to practice a new prayer, the Jesus Prayer. It's a simple prayer that dates back to the 5th century with the monastic Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers. It finds its biblical roots in the Book of Luke and the Book of Phillipians. The prayer has a rich history, especially in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. It's a very simple prayer of repentance:

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The prayer should be seen as an act of confession and surrender. We confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and Son of God and surrender to him, the infinite God, for we are finite and in need of salvation. It is the opposite of self-aggrandizement but one of humility. It is a prayer seeking the presence of an infinite God amid our own messy lives.

There are variations of the Prayer used: "Christ, have mercy on me," based on the ancient church recitation, "Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy." The full text of the Prayer combines some scripture passages: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

We use the final reference, "a sinner," in recognition of our own weakness and need for God's mercy, grace, and love. It also helps to make the prayer a loop, for as we conclude by considering our own messiness and sinfulness, we are compelled once again to call on God's mercy and grace for our lives. In this way, when practiced rhythmically, the Prayer has no beginning and no end. To help keep cadence and rhythm, we slowly breathe in and out. However, this also allows us to recognize that in our breathing, God is with us.



INSTRUCTIONS

1. Find a place that is comfortable and somewhere where you can sit quietly and focus.
2. Bow your head and begin to breathe in and out. Be attentive to your breathing.
3. As you breathe in, say (silently in your head or quietly out loud), “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God”
4. As you breathe out, say (silently in your head or quietly out loud), “Have mercy on me, a sinner.”
5. Breathe in, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” Breathe out, “Have mercy on me, a sinner.”
6. Focus on these words and your breath, creating a rhythm, guarding your minds against distractions.
7. Focus on the meaning of the words, praying them from the heart and in the heart.
8. You will repeat this exercise between 150 and 200 times.
9. To keep track, tap your fingers to your thumb after each breath prayer. First, tap your index finger to your thumb, then your middle, your ring, pinky, and just thumb.
10. Once you do this on both hands (saying the prayer 10 times), you'll want to say the Lord's Prayer: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses. As we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.”
11. Repeat this cycle until you have reached at least 150. If others are still praying when you reach 150 recitations, continue on until your teacher tells you to finish.

Once we finish the practice, we will gather back together and reflect on our experiences.



Sharing our WOW

WOW MOMENT (5 MIN)



I know that praying like that can be different from how we normally pray. I wonder what your experience was like. Let's talk about what you experienced and why it impacted you in that way.



- Have you ever prayed that prayer before? If so, what was your practice like this time? If you haven't, what did you think?
- What did you like or not like about it?
- What stood out to you about your experience with this Jesus prayer? (This is their "WOW" moment).
- If you had to define prayer for someone unfamiliar with it, what would you say?
- Did this way of praying challenge our thoughts on prayer? Why?
- Did praying the Jesus Prayer bring up any emotions? What were they? Why do you think those specific emotions came up for you?
- What did you learn about yourself or God while praying this way?

What would culture say?

WHAT? (10 MIN)



We didn't form our beliefs about prayer alone. Many people helped us craft our beliefs, either on purpose or unintentionally.



- Think about where you come from---your family, friends, culture, values, etc. What might these people or things say, or how would they respond to the experience of the Jesus Prayer today?
- What would your friends or non-Christians say about your experience?
- How does this experience match or challenge our culture's perception of prayer?
- How do you see prayer represented on social media or in pop culture?

What does God say?

GOD? (20 MIN)



Prayer is a vital part of a life of faith. It brings us into communion with God and shapes who we are. The simplest way of thinking about it is that if you don't talk to anyone, then how can you have a relationship with them? In a similar vein, it's hard to have a relationship with God if we don't talk to God. But there are many ways to think about prayer and we have already experienced one in the Jesus Prayer (confession and surrender to God). Let's explore a couple more.

[Hand out rubric]

As we read, use this rubric to take notes and/or jot down places where you have questions, agree or disagree, etc.



Matthew 6:5-8

Theology Talk



One of the first things you might notice about Jesus's prayer is that it is extraordinarily simple. It is not a complex or elaborate prayer with loads of big words or ideas. It does not contain flowery language or long, drawn-out confessions, just four simple sections in two short lines.

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

For some, this might seem too simple, too shallow, or too easy. However, the prayer's simplicity has made it so powerful and has been prayed so many times by so many people in so many places over the past 1600 years. This simplicity lends itself to a universal nature that has allowed people throughout the generations of different languages, cultures, nationalities, and denominations to pray it with conviction.

In Matthew 6:5-8, Jesus, as a part of his famous Sermon on the Mount, spends a whole section highlighting how his disciples should pray. In fact, he spends just as much time warning the disciples against some pitfalls he sees when some people pray. Jesus warns against big spectacles when praying and that the prayers are not for others to hear or see but between God and the person praying. He also tells us not to use heaps of words like some do because God already knows what we need. Can you imagine the comfort that may have brought to the disciples? Imagine the comfort of hearing that you do not have to perform for God; you do not have to say just the right things in just the right ways for God to hear you. In fact, according to Jesus, when there are no words or the words are just a simple prayer like "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" God not only hears you but knows precisely the emotions, fears, worries, or joys behind those simple words.

Often, when someone is upset, distraught, angry, confused, or feels helpless, they may not have the words or knowledge to describe to God what they need. If the words of Jesus are to be believed, it's in these moments when God's presence, not summoned by fancy prayers, can be felt in simple words or deep breathing. That is one of the other beautiful things about the Jesus Prayer; it causes the one praying to slow down, calm themselves, and focus on their breathing. Focusing on one's breathing has been shown in both religious understanding and science to be both a spiritual practice and beneficial for a person's well-being. When they prayed, Jesus gave his disciples permission to be themselves, calm down, and not feel like they had to perform in order for God to hear their prayers. Jesus gives his disciples that same permission today through the Jesus Prayer.

Perspectives from Theologians



INSTRUCTIONS

Take a moment and slowly read the two different quotes out loud to students. Encourage them to listen quietly and attentively. Read through each quote twice.



READ

Prayer is an all-encompassing act by which people transcend the mute God of an apathetically endured reality and go over to the speaking God of a reality experienced with feeling in pain and happiness. It was this God with whom Christ spoke in Gethsemane.

Sölle, D. (1975). *Suffering* (L. E. Dahill, Trans.; Kindle ed.). Fortress Press.



READ

So when we pray, we are not entering into a laboratory; we are not testing God, and we are not being tested to see if we will succeed or fail. We are, rather, invited and welcomed into a loving and authentic exchange, into an abiding, with a living God who always moves toward us before we even have the thought to move.

Ellis, W. W. (2023). *Abiding in Amen: Prayer in a secular age* (Kindle ed., pp. 47–48).
Function.

Where is God?



SAY

Now that we have heard a couple of perspectives on prayer, let's talk about our thoughts on those.



ASK

- Have you ever had a time when you did not know what to pray or the words to use? If so, how did you feel during those moments?
- When Jesus talks about prayer, especially around simplifying it and taking any performance elements off, how does that make you feel? Does that change your perception of prayer? If so, how?
- What do you think the theologian Wesley Ellis means when he says that prayer is not a laboratory or something we get right or wrong?
- The Jesus Prayer is a prayer of surrender and confession. How does that challenge the way you think about prayer? Why is it important to pray those types of prayers?
- In light of all of this, what would you say the purpose of prayer is?

Alignment activity

ALIGNING WITH GOD (10 MIN)



Keep in mind that this is a prayer practice. Just like anything, the more you practice prayer, the better you become at it. It is hard to sit down in silence and focus, especially when we are used to noise and find comfort in it. However, as you practice the Jesus Prayer and allow it to become a part of your life, you become better at sitting, listening, and letting God's presence seep into your life so that maybe one day it begins to shape not only your relationship with God but with the world as well.



- How do you think prayer could change the way you interact with God?
- How do you think prayer could change the way you interact with the world?
- If you prayed the Jesus Prayer each day, 100 times a day, how might it shape the way you live your life?

Prayer

CLOSING ACTIVITY (5 MIN)

Circle up to close in this prayer:

 READ

Blessed are we in this terrible, wonderful now.
Fumbling around for the right words.
We need so much, and it seems impossible to say at all.

Blessed are we as we learn to trust, trust a God who hears, who listens, who hasn't left our sides, who prays on our behalf, interpreting those deep groans we can't quite put into syllables or sounds.

And blessed are we who live here in the someday, but not now.

Amen.

Adapted from Kate Bowler's "a blessing for when you might not know how to pray (or want to)"

Bowler, K. (n.d.). A blessing for when you might not know how to pray (or want to). KateBowler.com.
<https://katebowler.com/blessings/a-blessing-for-when-you-might-not-know-how-to-pray-or-want-to/>

CONFUSED

These concepts, ideas, or points the author has made don't make sense to me...

ASK: Who can shed some light on this?

MY EXPERIENCE

This helps me see my own experience of people, the world, God or myself in this new way...

ASK: Who else has had this experience?

MY BELIEFS

I'd never before thought about this idea that the author presents:

Do you believe the author is correct?
Why or why not?

ASK: Who else doesn't believe it? Who does?

GRASP IT

Another way to explain one of the author's main points is this...

ASK: Do others think that's the main point?