



Practicing Prayer

An Essential Practices Study

Gathering Around the Practice

As you prepare to engage in this study as an individual or as part of a class, consider the following questions to begin to think about the practice of Prayer:

- **Which forms of prayer or worship have been most beneficial in shaping your faith journey? Why?**

Introduction

If you've been involved in the church for a while, it is likely that you have heard a sermon on prayer, been asked to pray, and have heard others pray aloud. Our understanding of prayer - how to pray, who can pray, when to pray, and what prayer means - can be deeply shaped by our experiences.

Prayer involves both speaking to God and allowing God to speak to us. The corporate practice of prayer is one form of communion with God, where we come to God in humility and honesty with ourselves and our faith community. By praying together, we encounter God in the tangible love and care of the community who journeys with us.

Individual prayer is an intimate communion with God, who knows us and knows our every weakness, and loves us still. Prayer can take many forms but is always an invitation for us to hit the pause button on our own agendas of life and place ourselves in a space where we can realign ourselves with God.

If we understand Sabbath to be an exchange of our daily rhythms for holy rhythms, then the practice of Prayer becomes the threshold to Sabbath-keeping. Prayer can function like a pause button on our anxieties, fears, concerns, and troubles. Prayer is a reminder to pause from distractions and connect with God's presence, acknowledging the One who brings us comfort and guidance through all of life's moments. It is key to entering Sabbath rest, allowing us to let go of those things which bind us or keep us stuck.

"Prayer is none other than an expanding of our hearts in the presence of God."

-John Calvin

Sabbath, like Prayer, can be both individual and communal. Sabbath offers a space for coming together in celebration of the communal bond we have in Christ. The practice of Prayer in community is an opportunity for reconciliation with God and with one another so we may go back into the world to bear witness to God's reconciling love.



Why Prayer Matters

Perhaps the most recognizable prayer is the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew 6:9-13. In that example of prayer, we find these words: "When you pray..." It wasn't an optional activity for those who followed Christ, it was expected as part of their lifestyle. Prayer is a human inclination to express our need, our joy, our desires, and our pain to God. In this way, prayer is an attitude and an orientation toward God.

Prayer is vital to our spiritual growth and the formation of our spiritual lives because it changes our outlook and our orientation. It restores hope, binds us to the community of faith, and bends us towards God's will. No doubt, life can be scary, regardless of how old or young you may be. In the face of an ever-changing world with complex issues that can sometimes seem insurmountable, prayer ought to be our hope that there is One who can bring peace to our hearts and meaning to our lives. Even more, when we pray on behalf of others, we move outside ourselves. We expand our capacity for empathy and compassion. We can be moved to action.

Prayer can also help us discipline our minds as we learn to deal with distractions. When we pray using various methods, we can engage our creativity and our imagination. When we learn to pray in the everyday moments of life, then each day is a prayer; an expression of our gratitude, our lament, our joy, our love to God.

Prayer matters in the life of faith because it is how we grow. When we pray, we are changed.

Prayer in Scripture

Consider these passages as you prepare to lead others in this practice:

The Lord's Prayer—Matthew 6:9-13 (NRSVUE)

"Our Father in heaven, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. May your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one."

As mentioned earlier, probably the scripture most often associated with prayer is found in the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus teaches his followers how to live with one another in obedience to God. Again, it is notable that the gospel writer uses the word "when" and not "if" to present Jesus' teachings. This passage can be seen as Jesus' invitation to us to pray, rather than God's demand that we pray.

Also see **Luke 11:1-4** – This is an abbreviated version of the Lord's Prayer, but in this passage, the prayer is provoked by the disciple's inquiry, "Lord, teach us to pray," which they make after watching Jesus pray. This passage can lead to conversations about how people learned to pray, who taught them, whether they watched others pray, and more.

Ask, Seek, Knock—Matthew 7:7-8 (and Luke 11:9-10) (NRSVUE)

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

These are parallel passages in both gospels once again. The Luke text follows The Lord's Prayer in verses 1-4 where Jesus invites his followers into an intimate, parental-like relationship with God. He encourages them to address God as "Abba," which is often translated as "Father." This kind of relationship between parent and child is built on absolute trust that the parent will provide what is good and life giving. Sometimes the child's wants are not the same as the needs of the child. It is wise to be aware of what we say and teach about unanswered prayer. Ultimately, prayer is about our relationship with God more than about the answers we receive to our prayers.

Always Praying—I Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NRSVUE)

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

These closing verses written by Paul sound a bit like the advice of a parent preparing to send a child off on a trip. "Don't forget to brush your teeth. Make your bed every morning. Be polite." Paul advises the Thessalonians to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all things. How is it possible to pray without ceasing? Paul is known for his use of exaggerated phrases – always, in all things, unceasingly—so we should not think of this advice as rigid or absolute white standard for prayer. However, we can consider it an invitation to find ways to pray that flow in and through our lives in the context of an ongoing relationship with God.

Prayer in Practice

Prayer and worship as a Sabbath practice are vital to our spiritual growth and the formation of our spiritual lives because it changes our outlook and our orientation. Prayer functions like a pause button - putting a hold on the fears, concerns, troubles and anxieties before us. Worship is an offering of pure gratitude, acknowledging that we are not alone in our circumstances. The Triune God is the one who sees us, walks with us and guides us through the troubles and triumphs of life. Together, prayer and worship help to restore hope, bind us to the faith community and align us towards God's will. This Sabbath practice of prayer and worship is an opportunity for reconciliation with God and with one another so we may bear witness showing God's reuniting love to ourselves and to one another.

- **What has the practice of prayer and worship done for your spiritual growth? Your relationship with God?**
- **How have you used prayer and worship to help bring clarity or sustain you through the scary or disheartening situations in life?**
- **How has the practice of individual or communal prayer and worship brought hope or meaning to our lives?**
Have you ever shared this found hope or meaning with the children or youth in your life? Why or why not?
- **How do you wish prayer and worship were taught, expressed or nurtured in your household or faith community?**
- **How has prayer and/or worship invited you to a different way of seeing or being?**
- **How do the ways you prefer to pray or worship compare or differ to the ways you learned (or didn't learn) as a child?**
- **How have your prayers or the ways you've engaged in worship changed over time?**

Prayer in Action

There are lots of ways to practice Prayer both individually and in community. When a new form of prayer practice is introduced into a community, be sure to provide a thorough explanation and an example of the practice. Individuals should never be forced to participate, but rather encouraged to experiment with new forms of prayer as a way of opening up to God in new and unexpected ways. Be sure to consider how to address the needs of a variety of ages and stages of individuals, reassuring everyone that there is no one way to pray, and encouraging them to try new ways of praying. Here are some ways to practice Prayer at home or in community.

- **Write out your prayers.** Individuals can journal or write out their prayers. Smaller children can be encouraged to have a picture journal of prayers.
- **Use Lectio Divina as a means of praying Scripture.** This form of sacred reading invites us to slow down and focus on the text, reading each verse carefully and thoughtfully, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide our understanding.
- **Experiment with a contemplative form of prayer.** Try using a breath prayer, walk a labyrinth, practice centering or contemplative prayer. Listen to sacred music like the Taizé chants, which are available through most major online music sites.
- **Pray about current events.** This is a great exercise with a household. When something is happening in the community or the world, the household can talk about it and offer prayer as a response. Pray for the helpers, pray for those that might be hurt or in trouble, pray that all might know peace and comfort. Not all news will be appropriate for all ages.
- **Take a walk in nature.** Getting away to a natural setting can be very helpful to clear your mind and bring a sense of balance. Augustine said, “*solvator ambulando*,” which means, “it is solved by walking.”
- **Pray at meals consistently.** Regular prayers before a meal, when done intentionally, invite those present to consider how God has provided for them.
- **Fast and pray during a season or certain days.** Fasting may not be appropriate for everyone, in terms of age and health, but it is a way that Jesus taught us to pray. Using the time that one would typically eat and praying in its place can become a mini-Sabbath during our day.
- **Use a practice like the Ignatian Examen.** There are many online resources that have modified this monastic discernment practice for daily postmodern use. At its core, we find a way of reflecting that turns our minds toward how God is present in our daily lives.
- **Incorporate body prayer:** Engage in prayer that involves physical movement, such as using gestures, postures, or movements that express devotion and connection to God. This can be a powerful way for children and youth to experience prayer in a more embodied and interactive manner. This is a wonderful practice to consider for those with neurodivergence or differing abilities.

Sending

As you go,

What is one way you can practice prayer for yourself?

Within your household?

Within your faith community?

Within the community you live in?

Blessing:

The Lord will protect you on your journeys, whether going or coming,

And the peace that Jesus promised, will be ever flowing.

May the gifts of the Holy Spirit guide you through life's embrace,

And the joy of the Lord strengthen you in every place.

As you walk your path and face each new sight,

May God's blessings surround you, from dawn until night. Amen.

Additional Resources

If you would like to explore more about Prayer take a look at the all ages Congregational Guide of the *Follow Me* curriculum practice "[Pray](#)" at www.pcusa.store.com. These resources can be used in worship, age level study, and intergenerational settings.



[Resource list](#) for the practice of Prayer.

This study is a part of a [Sabbath practices toolkit](#).