
Learning to Pray

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Reverend George M. Maxwell, Jr.**

Shortly after I arrived at the Cathedral, almost six years ago now, a man walked in one day and asked to see a priest. He told me a tragic story of loss and disappointment. He had made one bad decision after another. He had lost his family. He had lost his job. He had come close to losing his sanity. He wanted to find God again. He wanted to learn how to pray.

"Will you teach me how to pray?" he asked.

"I would be honored," I replied. And, then, I began to tell him about the different kinds of prayer: petition, adoration, confession, oblation, and intercession. I told him about the Daily Office: Morning Prayer, Noonday Prayer, Evening Prayer and Compline. I told him about centering prayer, meditation and other ways of praying without words. The more I talked the more overwhelmed he looked. The energy drained from his eyes. His face actually fell. "Oh," he said. "I was thinking more about, well, maybe stopping in the morning to say 'thank you' and then again at night to say 'I'm sorry'."

It turns out that he was closer to Jesus than I was!

Jesus didn't actually say much about prayer. He taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer, of course, but most of what Jesus teaches us about prayer he teaches us through his actions. Prayer is simply part of how he responded to the concrete challenges of his daily life. When someone needed healing, Jesus prayed for healing and healed them. When someone needed feeding, he prayed for food and fed them. When someone needed forgiving, he prayed for forgiveness and forgave them.

There are times when Jesus carved out time for more reflective prayer. He made time to be alone with God. Sometimes he went into the wilderness; sometimes he went up to the mountain top; and sometimes he went out into the sea. And, interestingly, the more hectic his life became, the more intentional he seemed to be about creating space for prayer.

What strikes me, though, is how much Jesus trusted in God. He always had his feet on the ground, looking directly at whatever life presented to him. Yet, he always kept his heart open to God, listening to God's voice to guide him. He always seemed to be at peace with himself. It is possible, Jesus reminds us to "gain the whole world, but lose ourselves." (Luke 9:25)

It is this trust, I think, that frees us to live our lives more fully. It lets us stand before God as children, inviting a loving parent to work through us in our daily lives. When we are wrong, we pray for forgiveness. When we are right, we pray for humility. When we are sick, we pray for healing. When we witness the suffering of others, we pray for their freedom. The more we learn about how to do this, the more we realize that it's really not about us. It's about God.

A friend of mine came up to me in the gym recently. "I've been thinking," he said, "would you teach me how to pray?"

"I would be honored," I replied. And, then, I asked him what he was currently doing. When he said "nothing, really," I

suggested that he start by just taking a moment in the morning to say "thank you" and another one at night to say "I'm sorry." There's more, I assured him. But, this seems like a good place to start.

As I talked, he began to look more interested. The eyes widened and his face brightened. "You know," he said, "that makes a lot of sense."

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