

The P-R-A-Y model

Sometimes our prayers are lopsided. We spend all of our time complaining to God without offering any praise. We ask for this and that, without ever mentioning the ways we have sinned or failed to serve God. Or we yammer on without ever stopping to listen. This is a model for structuring your prayers to balance the different parts:

P – Praise. Offer the Lord praise for everything he has done in your life and the lives of those around you. Praise God for the simple pleasures of life. Praise God for beauty. Or just simply praise!

R- Repent. Now consider the ways you have failed to serve God in the past few days. Have you sinned in your heart? Have you actively sinned? Or, as our confession asks, have you sinned in what you have left undone? Confess your sins to God and seek the forgiveness of Christ.

A – Ask. At this point it is appropriate to ask God for the things that you need, or to ask for those around you. God knows our needs better than we do. Ask in a spirit of humility: remember Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Not my will be done, Father, but yours."

Y – Yield. Finally, yield to the Lord. Be silent and listen for that "still, small voice" inside. See what God might be saying to you. Be ready to yield to God's will as it is revealed. Obedience is key!

Questions Jesus Asked

Consider the questions Jesus asked. Pray through your answers with God. Pause often and listen for God's answers, which might be clear as thunder or still and quiet as the voice of your conscience.

- Why are you afraid? (Matthew 8:26)
- What is it you want me to do for you? (Mark 10:36)
- My God, why have you forsaken me? (Mark 15:34)
- Why were you searching for me? (Luke 2:49)
- Why do you call me "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I tell you? (Luke 6:46)
- Where is your faith? (Luke 8:25)
- Who do you say that I am? (Luke 9:20)
- What is written in the law? (Luke 10:26)
- What is the kingdom of God like? (Luke 13:18)
- When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? (Luke 18:8)
- Why do you call me good? (Luke 18:19)
- What are you looking for? (John 1:38)
- Do you want to be made well? (John 5:6)
- Will you lay down your life for me? (John 13:38)
- Have you believed because you have seen me? (John 20:29)
- Do you love me? (John 21:17)

Lectio Divina

One ancient method of prayer is praying scripture, or *lectio divina*. Choose a passage of the Bible (suggestions below) and read it slowly, word-by-word and phrase-by-phrase. Stop after each phrase and repeat it to yourself in prayer. Don't worry about making sense of it. Just let it pass through your head and your heart, then lift it up to God and let it become your prayer. When you finish the passage, reflect on what you have read, prayerfully, and see if God speaks.

Easter: Read one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' passion and death... John 18-19, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23, or Matthew 26-27. Or pray your way through the following passages recommended for Easter vigils...

Genesis 1:1-2:4a / Psalm 136:1-9 / Psalm 33 /
Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13 / Psalm 46 /
Genesis 22:1-18 / Psalm 16 / Exodus 14:10-31;
15:20-21 / Exodus 15:1b-13, 17-18 / Isaiah 55:1-11 /
Isaiah 12:2-6 / Ezekiel 36:24-28 / Psalm 42 / Ezekiel
37:1-14 / Psalm 143 / Romans 6:3-11

Pentecost: Read Jesus' farewell teachings for his disciples, especially John 14 and John 16:17-33. Also read Jesus' prayer for his followers, John 17:6-26. Starting with Pentecost in Acts 2, read through Acts. You might focus on the sermons recorded in Acts 2:14-41; 3:12-26; 10:27-48; 13:16-43. Consider the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 1:8) and the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:35-39; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28).

Pray Hymns

A variation on *lectio divina*, using music. Look up some of your favorite hymns and pray the lyrics. Don't recite them by rote – listen to the words and let them be your voice praising and petitioning God. The hymnal is arranged by topic. See the index (UMH 934) for sections related to specific concerns.

Pray the Lord's Prayer or the Creeds

Try to pray the Lord's prayer or the creeds with a fresh voice, rather than falling into the same old path. See the different versions on pages 894-896 of the hymnal. You can do the same thing with the creeds. There are several on pages 880-889 of the hymnal. More excellent prayers are on pages 890-893.

Wrong Prayers?

There is almost no wrong way to pray. We don't need to be eloquent. We don't need to be happy (see Psalm 137). We don't even need to be confident (see Mark 9:24). Our heavenly parent can take our anger, our grief, our confusion, and respond wisely and lovingly.

The Examen

The examen, or examination of consciousness, is a practice for discerning the voice and activity of God within the flow of the day. The goal is to notice both God and our God-given desires throughout our day. Dennis Linn says, "The examen makes us aware of moments that at first we might easily pass by as insignificant, moments that ultimately can give direction for our lives."

Set aside a regular time to enter into the presence of God and ask yourself two questions. The questions can be variations on the following pairs...

- For what moment today am I most grateful? For what moment today am I least grateful?
- When did I give and receive the most love today? When did I give and receive the least love today?
- What was the most life-giving part of my day? What was the most life-thwarting part of my day?
- When today did I have the deepest sense of connections with God, others, and myself? When today did I have the least sense of connection?
- Where was I aware of living out the fruit of the Spirit? Where was there an absence of the fruit of the Spirit?
- Where did I experience desolation? Where did I find consolation?

"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." – Colossians 1:9

"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ." – Philippians 1:9-10

God-given fruits of daily examen include...

- Keeping company with Jesus throughout all the highs and lows of the day.
- Recognizing God's presence in your experiences.
- Developing more discernment and receptivity to God's voice.
- Freedom from "acting the guru," pointing others toward listening to God, not to you.
- Fostering gratitude.
- Being aware of your growing edges.
- Being aware of God-given desires.

Five-Finger Prayer

This is a children's prayer technique, but it is very effective as a reminder for adults as well.

1. Your thumb is nearest you. So begin your prayers by praying for those closest to you. They are the easiest to remember. To pray for our loved ones is, as C. S. Lewis once said, a "sweet duty."
2. The next finger is the pointing finger. Pray for those who teach, instruct and heal. This includes teachers, doctors, and ministers. They need support and wisdom in pointing others in the right direction. Keep them in your prayers.
3. The next finger is the tallest finger. It reminds us of our leaders. Pray for the president, leaders in business and industry, and administrators. These people shape our nation and guide public opinion. They need God's guidance.
4. The fourth finger is our ring finger. Surprising to many is the fact that this is our weakest finger, as any piano teacher will testify. It should remind us to pray for those who are weak, in trouble or in pain. They need your prayers day and night. You cannot pray too much for them.
5. And lastly comes our little finger - the smallest finger of all which is where we should place ourselves in relation to God and others. As the Bible says, "The least shall be the greatest among you." Your pinkie should remind you to pray for yourself. By the time you have prayed for the other four groups, your own needs will be put into proper perspective and you will be able to pray for yourself more effectively.

"I Spy God"

A variation of the old children's game. Instead of looking for physical objects hidden in your environment, look for God's presence hidden in the events and activities around you. Thank God for these glimpses through prayer.

Journal of Prayer

Some people find it helpful to keep a daily prayer journal in which they write down prayers and thoughts in their daily conversation with God. Here are some ideas to prime the pump as you write this evening...

- Write a letter to God. Tell God what you think, feel, and need. Remember that God knows you through and through and cares deeply for you.
- Write a letter from God to yourself. Imagine what God has to say to you. Remember, God loves you and wants what is best for you.

Acrostic Prayer

Sometimes it is easy to overlook something we need to pray about. One way to overcome this is to use a system that forces us to think outside our normal patterns. Acrostic is a system that was used by some of the psalm writers and the author of Lamentations. Think of a significant word or phrase and write the letters in a column. Then think of something to pray about that begins with each letter. You can also use the alphabet, for a prayer that is complete from A to Z! Here is an example written by Enuma Okoro...

Babies born, hand-picked or fully dipped
Adults who choose themselves the time and
Place of death, slipping off old skin
Tripping on their infant feet, learning to crawl again
In this newness of life
Sin washed away in the clean day of
Making men and women, boys and girls anew

Your acrostic does not need to be this elegant, but matching thoughts to letters is a useful device for coming up with things you might otherwise forget to lift up to the Lord.

Icon/Art Prayer

This technique is common in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Use a piece of art to help you prayerfully reflect on God, cast a biblical story in a new light, see or God's relationship with us. We are not worshipping an image – God can't be contained or captured in images – but sometimes images can help us catch glimpses of God we might not otherwise consider.

Pay attention to how you feel... What is your overall reaction to the art? How do you feel when you look at the art? What thoughts or associations come into your mind? Who would you like to share the art with?

Pay attention to what you see... Don't look for quick answers; give yourself time to explore. Jot down notes about what you see, what you feel, questions you have. What do the lines or colors say? Are some parts lighter or darker? Is space or location of elements in the art important? Are there recognizable symbols?

Pay attention to context... What do you know about the artist and his/her experience? What do you know about the scene being depicted? What things in your life resonate with the art?

Google (<http://images.google.com>) can provide some thought-provoking art for you. Search for a scripture verse or topic and see what results you get.

Picture Prayer

Draw a picture, using it to focus your thoughts and prayers on a specific subject. What does God look like to you, and how do you relate to God? What does the path to Heaven look like – straight, zig-zag, or a circle; is there a door or a gate at the end; is it open or shut? How do you interact with the children of God – are you a servant, a master, a soldier, a wallflower, a fugitive? What does heaven look like? Are you in the picture? You may choose to leave your art at the altar railing as an offering to God and for others to contemplate.

God at Work

We say that God was incarnate in Jesus – that God lived among us as a man. We are confronted with a mystery: Jesus was not less than God, but he was not more than a man. How often do we think about what that really means? It means Jesus grew up in a family and participated in human routines like eating, laughing, washing, walking, weeping, talking, and more. It means Jesus worked two different jobs: a blue-collar job as a carpenter, and a white-collar job as a traveling teacher/professor/rabbi. It means that Jesus went to church like everyone else, but he did not confine himself to religious activities. It means that Jesus used his divine power to work miracles for others, but not to work miracles to save himself from temptation or the cross.

As you contemplate the mystery of Jesus as both God and human, consider that we also are a mortal body joined to an immortal soul. How do we live out this mystery in our daily lives, in our work, play, and worship? Pray through the answers you get to these questions.

Popcorn Prayer

Sometimes we struggle to focus our thoughts. Other times we think of something that requires prayer even as we are distracted by our daily business.

These moments can become kernels of prayer. Don't worry about eloquence, or even completeness. Just turn the thought into an intentional prayer and let it pop up to God. Release it in the moment and go on with your day.

The God who can bring order out of chaos can certainly disentangle your thoughts and know your intentions, even if you can't. 😊

Walking the Labyrinth

The labyrinth as a path for prayer and meditation has a long history in Christianity dating at least to the 4th century. Real labyrinths are room-sized patterns on the floor. The Chartres Cathedral (France) labyrinth is printed below – trace the path with your finger.

Collect yourself before you start. Think of different people, events, situations, places or things in your life to develop a specific intention if you wish to use one in your meditation.

Imagine God in the center of the labyrinth. The path might represent our life's journey. Although sometimes it seems we are closer to or farther from God, there is only one destination.

Be present to yourself, and to the mysterious power of God. As you walk the path, thoughts and ideas may rise up for you and in you, often in refreshing and startling ways. Walk slowly. There is no need to rush. Remember, there is only one path in and one path out. You will not get lost – just as when you journey with Jesus.

People have different experiences walking the labyrinth. Some people feel a sense of peace. Others find old memories rising up as they walk. Others find themselves thinking about an immediate situation or person. Some people have profound insights. Others have very small experiences or none at all. The experience of walking the labyrinth is different for each person, each time. Relax and see what happens.

