

Putting Prayer into Practice

by Chris Schoon, director of Faith Formation Ministries

One day, after listening to Jesus pray, his disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). It was a simple and heartfelt request, but the significance of it becomes evident when we take a step back.

This account is the *only* recorded occurrence in which the disciples directly ask Jesus to teach them something. They seem to have no hesitation about healing the sick or casting out demons (Mark 6:13). A few chapters earlier, Luke tells how two of the disciples even offered to call down fire from heaven on a village that did not receive Jesus (Luke 9:54)—a pretty bold offer, for which they get a firm rebuke from Jesus. But somehow, in all they were invited to do as they followed Jesus, the disciples recognized that they needed Jesus to teach them how to pray.

As Jews in the first century, the disciples would have known and sung the prayers that make up the psalms. So it’s not that they didn’t know how to pray at all. But they recognized something different in the way John the Baptist’s followers prayed and in Jesus’ own practices of prayer — and they wanted to learn to pray that way.

Formed through Praying

Volumes can be (and have been) written about prayer, including the basic question “What is prayer?” But our attention here is on the formative aspects of prayer. Like other [faith practices](#), prayer “enriches our attention to the Holy Spirit, cultivates the life and character of Jesus Christ in us, and strengthens our love for God and others.” This understanding of prayer as a faith practice (or, more traditionally, as a spiritual discipline) moves us away from seeing prayer as primarily our own activity or work, or as something we do to gain God’s blessings, or even as the means for persuading God to do what we want. Rather, **the faith practice of prayer is a way in which we actively submit ourselves and our world to God’s ongoing transformational work in Christ by expressing ourselves to God and listening for God to engage with us.** Or, in other words, prayer is our way of opening our hearts and inviting God to speak with us and change us and our world.

From this perspective, prayer has more layers than simply the words we voice, the occasions that prompt us to pray, and the closed eyes and folded hands with which we often signify we are praying. **God transforms us in and through our prayer practices to help us more fully and faithfully imitate the activity, character, and love of God in the specific relationships and circumstances of our lives.**

Four Formative Aspects of Prayer

Prayer forms us in many, many ways, but the practices of prayer contain at least four formative aspects that help us become more like Jesus Christ. These formative aspects are not guaranteed steps on an assembly line that will make prayer work. Rather, the four elements named here help us to grow in our attentiveness and responsiveness to the ways God is present and active in our lives and in the world around us.

Prayer involves listening for God to speak

While people rarely audibly hear God speak, practicing prayer tunes our hearts to be attentive to the wide range of ways in which God communicates with us. When we listen for God during prayer, we lean into Psalm 46:10, in which God calls us to “be still” and know that he is God.

This posture of listening in prayer forms us to be attentive to the ways in which God’s self-revelation and engagement within the universe continue all around us all the time. When we listen in prayer, we start to expect God to be accessible and actively involved in each circumstance we encounter, even when we are not engaging in a set-aside time for prayer.

Prayer trains us to bring all of our circumstances and emotions before God

One of the benefits of praying through the psalms and other biblical prayers on a regular basis is that we learn to bring the full range of our human experiences before God.

We can pray with Psalm 8’s majestic awe of God’s calling on humanity, and we can lament with Psalm 13’s “How long, O Lord? . . . How long . . . ?” We can add our voice in euphoric response to Psalm 148’s praises of creation. And we can plumb the depths of a people who felt abandoned by God to the whims of their captors, as does Psalm 137’s prayer to dash the infants of their enemies against the rocks.

Prayer practices train us to see every occasion and every emotion as worthy of conversation with God. We don’t need to hold back. Rather, God welcomes and invites our prayers, even in their rawest, most unrefined expressions.

Prayer forms us to desire wholeness and holiness

In our encounter with God through prayer, we frequently become aware of places in our lives and in our world that need healing, forgiveness, and transformation. Prayer practices give us space to recognize and name the ways in which the fullness of God’s coming kingdom has yet to be realized in us, among our friends and families, through our churches and communities, and across the world.

Making room for these prayers of lament, grief, and confession, the Spirit often deepens our desire for everyone to experience the wholeness and holiness extended to us through Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. We begin to long not only for an abstract eternal salvation

from our sins, but for a salvation that starts to undo sin and its consequences in us and in the world around us, right here and right now.

Prayer realigns us with the character of God's mission in the world

Finally, as we engage in practices of prayer, the Spirit continues to realign us with the character of God's mission in the world. This formative aspect may often take the longest to bear fruit because it involves untangling us from immediate outcomes and invites us to trust that God is doing more than we see or understand.

We discover through prayer that faithful living involves letting go of our perceptions and priorities in order to allow the priorities of God's kingdom and the witness of God's character in Jesus Christ to become the primary orientation points for our lives. Our decision making, our relationships, and the way we respond to circumstances, particularly difficult ones, shifts in prayer from asking God to provide what we want to wondering, watching, and working for the coming of God's kingdom.

Invitation

As you consider how to practice prayer in your context, you are invited to check out the Faith Practices Project's prayer resources. These resources are designed to help you encounter and experiment with a variety of prayer practices. As you try out different practices of prayer, we'd love to learn alongside you. Share your practices with #CRCFaithPractices and tag us on Twitter (@crc_ffm), Facebook (@faithformationCRC), and Instagram (@crcfaithformation).