

## Beads and Prayer



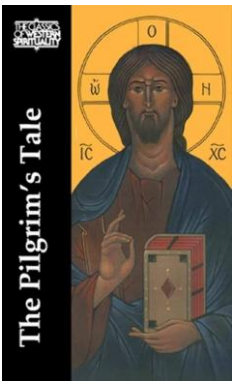
This is a prayer bracelet. I remember when I came to this church two years ago, we made this prayer bracelet together after the service.

Some of you might be surprised to know that prayer beads have been part of the Christian tradition for over a thousand years. We often associate them with the Catholic Rosary. But prayer beads are not only Catholic. The desert fathers and mothers used the same method.



The Eastern Orthodox Church has used the knotted prayer rope — called a *chotki* or *komboskini* — for fifteen centuries. The Anglican Church also used rosaries. We see that prayer beads connect various traditions, times, communities of believers, etc. So, I believe that it was instinctively guided by the Holy Spirit.

Here is what is fascinating to me. In the Middle Ages, Christians would count their prayers on small, round objects strung together on a cord. And because these little objects were used for *bede* — for prayer — people began to call them beads. The object took its name from the act. The thing was named after what it was meant to do. Which expresses the same longing toward God; the universal deep longing of all human beings. It is a simple, humble, and precious tool towards God for thousands of years. And beads are surely tangible and visible reminders towards God.



Today I want to introduce especially the Eastern Orthodox Christian teaching about prayer through 1,500 years of time. The story is written in the book, *The Pilgrim's Tale*. It begins with a homeless Russian peasant with a withered arm wandering from church to church to learn one thing. One Sunday, he hears a reading from 1 Thessalonians 5:17: “Pray without ceasing.” Deeply puzzled by how an ordinary person can work and survive while praying every second, he travels across Russia looking for someone to explain *how* to do it. Sermons tell him *why* prayer is important, but not *how* to achieve ceaseless prayer. Eventually, the pilgrim meets a *starets* (a holy Eastern Orthodox spiritual elder). Who said that he can teach how to pray without ceasing. The elder introduces him to a massive collection of monastic writings called the *Philokalia* and teaches him the *Jesus Prayer*: **“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” (Or the shorter form: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”)**

The process of embedding this prayer into his life happens in deliberate, rhythmic stages under the elder's strict guidance using a knotted prayer rope (*chotki*). The pilgrim was instructed to say the prayer exactly 3,000 times a day. At first, it was a chore requiring pure effort, and his mind frequently drifted. Once he accomplishes that, the elder increases the count to 6,000 times a day. The pilgrim notes that his tongue and lips adapt, and he begins to look forward to the prayer. The elder increases it again to 12,000 times a day. The pilgrim spends his days purely focusing on hitting this count. Finally, the elder tells him to stop counting and just pray as much as he wants. By this point, the prayer has become a physical habit. The prayer soaked into his entire being.

During that period, what happened to the peasant's spirit? When he repeated the prayer, it gave rhythm to his breathing, heartbeat, and soul. It prepared a condition that was open to the spiritual world. Even when he sleeps, he wakes up to find his mind is still actively praying. As the prayer takes root, the pilgrim experiences a state of profound joy and peace. He notes that the entire world looked different to him; he felt an intense love for all of

creation. I experienced this too. The trees, birds, and Earth seem to be actively singing praises to God, and he feels deeply connected to everything around him. Even the physical hardships of being a homeless traveler—cold, hunger, exhaustion—lose their power over him. The internal warmth and sweetness of the prayer shield his mind from suffering. On his journey, miracles happened. He helped many people on the journey. He became a golden channel of God’s grace and love for others.

Now let us turn to the Word of God. What does the Bible say about this prayer life? In **Philippians 4:6-7, the Apostle Paul writes: “Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”**

Read those words again; *“Don't worry about anything. In everything (including wrong choices, mistakes, negativities in you) — through prayer and petition with thanksgiving — present your requests to God.”* God can turn every failure to something wonderful! (Romans 8:29) Here, the Greek word for **guard** is a military term. It means that peace of God guards at the gate of our hearts and minds. Peace stands guard. It is a peace with power.

This promise of peace is connected to the practice of prayer. This is where our second passage enters. In **Matthew 7:7-8, Jesus says — from the NRSV: “Ask, and it will be given to 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.”**

Ask. Search. Knock. It means keep asking. Keep searching. Keep knocking. A daily, ongoing turning toward God with trust and love. And that is exactly what a prayer bracelet invites us into. Not a single prayer, but a constant returning prayer. The Prayer Bracelet helps this repeating prayer, and it is a constant reminder on your wrist that God is very near, closer than breath and blood in a vein. This bracelet becomes an invitation to God’s presence and heart.

### **Personal Story**

When I was a student in Korea, there was a high school English teacher who influenced me a lot in positive and negative ways because she was immature as a spiritual teacher. After a certain spiritual encounter in the London subway, she came back to Korea and opened a Bible study. I was one of the attendees. She taught us to repeat prayer. It was the same principle of the Russian peasant. She had her unique prayer words related to her question regarding Jesus’ resurrection and the Red Sea God divided. She encouraged us to pray her prayer words, and I entered into the deep spiritual realm. It will be the same with you.

When you repeat the same prayers, soon your body in about 10 minutes will notice something is shifted. Something has changed; something is happening deep in your body and soul. And into that opening, God’s presence, deep peace, wrapped me. You will notice too. It was not because of the change of situation. When you are deep in the rhythm of prayer, something is woven into your soul, your spirit, your body. The moments are beautiful and refreshing. Like a breeze from Heaven. Prayer became natural, necessary, and life-giving. Peace surely guards your heart.

### **Pray Together**

I know that prayer is not easy. When you hold this bracelet in silence, this position is already prayer. You are returning to God. While you pray, your mind also wanders. The beads will guide you back to the prayer too.

And so, let us practice prayer together. If you have a prayer bracelet in your hands right now, hold it. If you do not have one, count the number with your fingers. I will show you how to count.



Sit comfortably, straighten your back. Take one slow breath. Let your shoulders drop. We will practice Jesus' prayer. Let us say it together now, slowly: **Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.** That is all! [Pause.]

Now pick up your bracelet if you have one. Or use your fingers. For each bead, we are going to breathe and pray this prayer quietly. You do not have to say it out loud. You can whisper it. You can say it only in your heart. Move slowly. There is no rush. One bead at a time. Focus on each word. [Guide the congregation through several beads together, pausing gently between each.]

Now take the first bead and first breath and say:

“Lord Jesus Christ... Son of God... have mercy on me.” [Pause and breathe.]

Now take the second bead and second breath, and say again:

Lord Jesus Christ... Son of God... have mercy on me. [Pause.]

Have this rhythm in your body and mind. And now you can use this word as prayer like the Eastern Orthodox Christian, or you can also choose your own words. It might be a single word — Jesus. Peace. Mercy. Help. Heal. It might be a short phrase — You are sovereign. I am yours. You are enough. Carry me today. Hold my family. I am afraid, but I trust you. Your honest words are enough.

We will continue to make your bracelets. If you do not have a bracelet, use your fingers. Practice this short prayer daily for 10 min. If you are ambitious, say it 3,000 times this week. It is like breathing; you will soon settle in the prayer because it rings in your ears continuously. This prayer is very simple, at the same time profoundly powerful prayer.

Let's close together.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us.

Thank you for being near.

Thank you that the door is open.

Thank you that our simple words are enough for you.

May your peace — the peace that passes all understanding — guard our hearts and our minds in you, today and every day.

Amen.