

The Jesus Prayer: For All of God's Church

Twelve simple words, but full of so much meaning: **Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.** Millions around the world pray this supplication, known as the “Jesus Prayer” or the “Prayer of the Heart.” It is practiced most prominently by members of the Orthodox churches, sometimes called “Eastern,” “Greek,” or “Greco-Russian.”¹ But the Jesus Prayer is a gift to the church universal, faithfully prayed by many Protestants and Roman Catholics who have found great power in its simplicity. In fact many have taken the fullest expression the prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” and found greatest resonance with its most basic form, simply stating the name of Jesus, the One to whom they pray (referred to as the “Holy Name” in Eastern Orthodoxy).

The practice of this prayer has been traced to the sixth century, but its origins are clearly biblical. Antecedents can be found in two of the most famous New Testament petitions, the tax collector's prayer in Luke 18:13, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner,” and Bartimaeus' cry in Mark 10:47, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

It fell upon the early Hesychasts (from the Greek for “stillness”), those concerned with inner, mystical prayer in the Orthodox church, to identify the place of the Jesus Prayer within Christian theology and tradition. The Hesychasts placed particular importance on unceasing repetition of this prayer.² It was by the grace of God and their faithfulness in the midst of adversity that the Prayer of the Heart and the Eastern Church survived both the Czarist and Communist oppressions through the 20th century.

In the hectic pace of the modern world, the Jesus Prayer provides a means of being opened toward a deepening relationship with God without compromise. Only a few minutes a day are necessary, perhaps twenty or thirty, the words to be said thoughtfully and quietly, belying the haste of the world around us. During the daily commitment to this prayer, it is to be the focus of our attention; there is time enough for supplication, intercession, and thanksgiving through any number of other methods of prayer. This time has been established for a particular kind of relationship with God, one of steadfast attention embodied by silent repetition, although many beginners find that giving quiet voice to this prayer is helpful.

But silence or quiet does not mean passive or unmoving. The Prayer of the Heart may be best practiced when sitting in the same place at the same time every day, with a cross, icon, candle, or other visual reminder of God facing you, but that is not the only way. Perhaps the most famous practitioner of the Jesus Prayer, the anonymous narrator of *The Way of the Pilgrim*, said the prayer while walking from town to town. Many others have made this prayer a normal part of their workday or while doing chores, or during the brief respites between one event and the next. Writes Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, Orthodox monk and Oxford professor:

The Jesus Prayer is a prayer of marvelous versatility. It is a prayer for beginners, but equally a prayer that leads to the deepest mysteries of the contemplative life. It can be used by anyone, at

any time, in any place: standing in queues, walking, traveling on buses or trains; when at work; when unable to sleep at night; at times of special anxiety when it is impossible to concentrate upon other kinds of prayer. 3

No device or prayer book is necessary, although many find a woolen, knotted prayer rope or Orthodox rosary (Greek: *komvoschoinion*; Russian: *chotki* 4) helpful, not for counting prayers in pursuit of works-righteousness, but to help maintain a necessary focus. Some find it useful to match their breath to the prayer, inhaling on the first one or two segments and exhaling on the latter, but this, too, is optional. *The Way of the Pilgrim* is a wonderful introduction to the prayer and its effects, but those desiring more in-depth study might look to the Orthodox text from the fourth to fifteenth centuries known as the *Philokalia*.

Admittedly, some may find the prospect of contemplative prayer difficult, accustomed as many are in the western Church to sharing words and thoughts with God rather than simply resting with God, as the 4th century church father Gregory the Great described contemplation. Others may even question the integrity of such a method. Yet a brief survey of the theology and tradition common to all Christians helps to lessen such concerns.

To begin, contemplation has been understood by the Church through the ages as a gift of God which we cannot prompt, but which is given to anyone whom God chooses. Some methods of prayer, such as the Jesus Prayer, open us to God's presence and still us amidst distractions so that we might be more attentive to what God is doing. In a classic illustration, contemplative prayer is the divine word blowing through our receptive sails, while more active methods of prayer signify our rowing the boat. In this case, the Jesus Prayer is the effort of rowing the boat out into the open sea, that we might be open to the wind that blows where it chooses (John 3:8).

Despite concerns to the contrary, there is no question that this is a Christian prayer — in its fullest expression perhaps the most basic, universal Christian prayer apart from Jesus' own. This is a bold statement, but one with defense. To begin, at its heart is the name of Jesus, the lowest common denominator for Christians of every time and place. It praises him by using the honorific "Lord," even as it claims him as Christ, and with Bartimaeus identifies him as Son of God. But as Orthodox bishop Anthony Bloom observes, the Prayer of the Heart does not stop at believing, for even the devils believe (James 2:19). Now that the one praying has called on the One who can save, the movement is natural to not only ask for mercy, but to confess one's sinfulness. Thus, in this simple prayer one is able to live out many of the acts of worship — adoration and praise, supplication and confession — repeatedly in a single span. This confirms Bloom's observation that the Jesus Prayer is "an act of worship... that allows us to keep our attention still in the presence of God." 5

It is a challenge to believers that so little can do so much, that twelve words have changed the lives of so many. Jesus' parables remind us again and again that simple does not mean unimportant, and truly radical means going to the root of the matter. Despite the innumerable books on the subject, some things can never really be learned, only lived. To pray without ceasing is to live a life of prayer. In the words of St. Meletius the Confessor, Bishop of Antioch (d. 381):

Prayer needs no teacher. It requires dialogue, effort,
and personal ardor, and then God will be its teacher.

1. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Eds. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone. NY: Oxford University Press, 1990: 1012-14.

2. *Ibid.* 644.

3. Timothy (Kallistos) Ware. *The Orthodox Church*. NY: Penguin Books, 1993: 305
Kallistos Ware. "Ways of Prayer and Contemplation: Eastern." *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*. Eds. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean LeClerq. *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, Vol. 16. NY: Crossroad, 1988: 407.

4. [Anthony Bloom](#). 28 January 2003. Originally published in *Living Prayer*. Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1966: 84-88.

5. [St. Ignatius \(Brianchaninov\)](#). 28 January 2003. Originally published in *Orthodox Life*, vol. 28, no. 5, Sept.-Oct. 1978, pp. 9-14.

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