

The Jesus Prayer
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The church has a rich history of prayer - and of prayers. The Lord's Prayer, The Hail Mary, and many prayers from scripture and the Psalms such as the Benedictus, the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimitus are a few examples. Since at least the sixth century, a prayer that has had an important role in the history of Christian Worship is The Jesus Prayer.

Though the Jesus Prayer has been used for centuries in the east by orthodox churches, for many the first exposure to the Jesus Prayer came from Franny and Zooey by J.D. Salinger: "... if you keep saying that prayer over and over again, you only have to just do it with your lips at first - then eventually what happens, the prayer becomes self- active. Something happens after a while. I don't know what but something happens, the words get synchronized with the person's heart-beats,"and then you're actually praying without ceasing. The prayer has one aim, and one aim only. To endow the person who says it with Christ -Consciousness." Another book that brought the Jesus Prayer to the western world was The Way of a Pilgrim, a Russian novel written in the mid-nineteenth century that was first translated into English in 1930.

There are many forms of the Jesus Prayer, but the most common is:

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

Though the Jesus Prayer is simple it is rich with meaning. To ask God to have mercy on us is to ask for lovingkindness. Mercy is comprised of compassion, charity, clemency, lovingkindness and grace. Compassion that forebears punishing even when justice demands it; Charity stresses benevolence and goodwill; Clemency implies a mild disposition in one having the power to punish; Grace implies a willingness to grant favors and meet one's needs.

When we pray to the Lord Jesus Christ, we pray to Jesus our savior and Christ the anointed King. In calling him Lord, we acknowledge him as our King and our Savior.

In addition to the most common forms of the Jesus Prayer, there are many variations of different lengths reflecting the different rhythms that individuals may be comfortable with.

- Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner
- Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. (the form I have found best synchronizes with my breathing)
- Lord Jesus, have mercy on me.
- Lord Jesus, have mercy.

The Jesus prayer could actually be expressed in one word Jesus. It is reverence for the Name coupled with an intent to seek God's mercy that is the foundation of the Jesus Prayer. Whatever the form, the Jesus prayer is not just some sort of mantra. It is actually a prayer from the heart of the person praying the prayer to the heart of God. We affirm meditatively in our hearts the beliefs summed up in the Apostle's creed, and we ask for God's mercy - his compassion, charity, clemency, and grace.

It is often suggested that those learning to pray the Jesus Prayer experiment with different forms to see what "fits" them best. The exact choice of words can be changed from time to time. We should be cautioned however to allow a specific formula time to become a part of our heart and

mind because as St. Gregory of Sinai writes, "Trees which are repeatedly transplanted do not grow roots."

The Jesus Prayer can be used for worship, petition, intercession, invocation, adoration, and thanksgiving.

Bishop Kallistos Ware, Bishop of Diokleia, speaks of the "free" and "formal" uses of The Jesus Prayer. The "free" use of The Jesus Prayer is when we are going about the normal activities of our day - prayed once or more often "...in the scattered moments which otherwise would be spiritually wasted: when occupied with familiar tasks... when walking or driving.... when waiting in lines or traffic jams... when unable to sleep. Part of the distinctive value of the Jesus Prayer lies precisely in the fact that, because of its radical simplicity, it can be prayed in conditions of distraction when more complex forms of prayer are impossible. It is especially helpful in moments of tension and anxiety." (*The Power of the Name*, published at the Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres, Oxford, © The Sisters of the Love of God, 1974). Bishop Ware goes on to speak of the "formal" use where our whole concentration is focused on the saying of the Prayer to the exclusion of external activity. The Jesus Prayer then forms a part of our intentional time of prayer. It could be said that in this case The Jesus Prayer is used to "create silence".

While individuals may be more drawn more to either the "free" or "formal" use of the Jesus Prayer, my experience is that they both compliment each other. Spending at least some using the Jesus Prayer in formal meditation and prayer strenghtens its efficacy when used in free form throughout the day.

While the Jesus Prayer as a prayer form and tradition is rooted in eastern orthodox spirituality, there are many other western examples of the spirit of the Jesus prayer. Contemplative prayer and centering prayer have much in common with the Jesus prayer. In charismatic and pentecostal worship many exclamatory prayers such as "Praise you Jesus" and simply "Jesus" are also in the spirit of the Jesus Prayer.

Francis of Assisi was a man for whom prayer was an utmost priority. He was also a man who was the perfect example of living simply - physically, spiritually, and prayerfully.

Once there was a brother novice who ... had heard it said that the holy father Francis did not want to see his brothers eager for learning and for books, but he preferred to see them - as he preached it - eager for pure and holy simplicity, for prayer, and for Lady Poverty. (Legend of Perugia, 70 Omnibus of Sources)

Bernard of Quintavalle was a rich and important man who was impressed by Francis early in Francis' ministry. He invited Francis to his home to test him. As they were going to sleep in the same room Francis pretended to be asleep. Bernard also pretended to be asleep by snoring loudly. When Francis thought that Bernard was sleeping, he got out of bed and began to pray. Bernard was convicted by what he saw to "leave the world and follow you in whatever you order me to do". He saw Francis

Looking up to Heaven and raising his hands, he prayed with intense fervor and devotion saying: "My God and my all" He kept repeating this with such devout persistence that until matins (he said nothing but "My God and my all". (Little Flowers of St. Francis, 2)

Francis was, very much, praying in the spirit of the Jesus Prayer. On another occasion:

He sought out a place of prayer ... frequently repeating this word: "O God, be merciful to me the sinner". (I Celano, X1,26)

This is another form of the Jesus prayer. So, the Jesus Prayer is very much alive in the spirit and example of St. Francis in addition to the more widely known Orthodox Christian traditions.

There are many ways of praying the Jesus Prayer. It is a short and simple way of immediately entering into prayer. No long preparation is required. It can be prayed anywhere, anytime during the day. Whenever one has a few moments they can enter into prayer that is simple, yet rich with meaning. It may be prayed meditatively through repetition.

Anthony DeMello, S.J. in his book *Contact With God* says, "I don't know why it is, but the fingering of beads brings to many people peace and prayerfulness; it is probably because it brings rhythm into the prayer." There is an excellent chapter, by the way, in this book on the Jesus Prayer.

The use of counting prayers or devotions is a tradition that goes back thousands of years, originally using stones, bone, clay, seeds, etc and exists across many faith traditions including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Today the most common forms used in conjunction with the Jesus Prayer include beads and knotted cords.

Greek Orthodox Christians, in particular, use a "prayer rope", a knotted cord of 33, 50, or 100 knots. Many Roman Catholics use a traditional Rosary praying the Jesus Prayer in place of the Rosary prayers. Anglicans and others who are not Orthodox or Roman Catholic use a form known as "Anglican Prayer Beads" or the Anglican Rosary.

Doing a web search for "prayer rope", "Anglican Rosary" or "Anglican Prayer Beads" will yield hundreds of results for each of these.

After many years of praying the Jesus Prayer, I have used a variety of forms of prayers beads and prayer ropes. Most recently, I have been using a prayer cord chaplet inspired by the Anglican Rosary (two "weeks" of seven knots instead of the standard four weeks). At six inches in length it is convenient enough to keep in my pocket and use regularly throughout the day.

<http://www.rosaryworkshop.com/SERVICERosaries.html> is an excellent resources for cord, tools and instructions to make your own prayer cords in whatever form you desire. There is a special significance to using a prayer rope that has been designed and made by the one who is using it!

The former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States highly recommends the Jesus Prayer. In an interview with Dan England, Director of Communications of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Frank Griswold says:

"I always carry in my pocket a Jesus Prayer rope, which consists of 50 knots. And between every ten knots there's a wooden bead. And it's made out of wool... I just sort of have it there in my pocket. And if I'm walking around the city I usually finger it and simply say my prayers. And when I'm stuck on a bridge somewhere and about to get frantic, or particularly, I'll tell you, in airplanes, when you've left the gate and your are told with no explanation that it is going to be an hour and a half before the plane takes off, and you're given the choice of becoming absolutely enraged or choosing some more ameliorating way of dealing with the situation. I sort of reach for my Jesus Prayer rope.

And I mean this quite seriously. Because my life is so hectic and busy, it's very easy to sort of lose the center and become totally reactive and live in a state of constant agitation. And just the discipline of saying the Jesus Prayer quietly to myself and trying to bring my breathing into relationship with the words of the prayer, which is part of the discipline, often reminds me that I am not the answer, but Christ is the answer, and that all I have to do is to be faithful and not get in the way. And so often just walking around I can kind of find my stability that way."

It is ironic that a prayer that has its roots in simplicity has spawned scores of books and articles. Some are short and succinct. Others are scholarly dissertations that delve deep into spirituality and the history and roots of the Jesus Prayer.

There are hundreds of web sites and many excellent books that a search of the internet will yield. I think I've read most of them! If you feel God calling you to explore this form of prayer that has been used for many centuries as a way of drawing the hearts' of God's people nearer to the heart of God, please read on...

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

My Home Page: www.norian.org (includes contact information if you wish to pursue discussion via email)

Third Order, Society of Saint Francis, Province of the Americas web page: www.tssf.org

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