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# PRAYER: MAKING GOD A HABIT

## January

*Praying with frequency gives us the readiness to pray again as needed from moment to moment. The more we pray, the more we think to pray, and as we see the results of prayer—the responses of our Father to our requests—our confidence in God’s power spills over into other areas of our life.*  
—Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

*Prayer.* Just the word made me feel slightly guilty.

There isn’t much more basic to your relationship with God than prayer. Maybe that’s why I always felt as though I didn’t pray enough or in the right way. I had this idea that to be a true Christian, you were supposed to spend an hour or so each morning in silent prayer. There is biblical support for praying in the morning, and I’m sure it is indeed a very good thing to do, but it’s not something I had ever managed, even pre-motherhood.

As a lifelong night owl, in the past I’d found bedtime to be a good time for prayer and reflection, but the impressive new heights of tired I’d reached since becoming a mom meant that my evening prayers now usually sounded like this: “Dear God, sorry that I was so impatient—[snore] . . .”

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So when I resolved to bring spiritual disciplines more intentionally into my life, I knew I wanted to start with prayer. But how to begin?

### **So Many Prayers**

In Richard J. Foster's book *Prayer*, he describes a dizzying twenty-one different kinds of prayer. Trying all twenty-one seemed a bit much for my month-long effort, like eating at a prayer buffet—a little bit of everything and not tasting or appreciating much of anything as a result. I decided I could manage a serious effort to practice three different kinds of prayer in turn: contemplative prayer, praying the Examen, and petitionary prayer.

First on my list: contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer is, simply put, listening to God. In a place of quiet, you lift your mind to God and, instead of letting loose with a flood of thanks or wonder or petition, you let God show or teach you what God will. It is sometimes referred to as God-led therapy. Perhaps the most eloquent description of contemplative prayer is found in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a book written by an anonymous author, probably an English monk, sometime in the fourteenth century: "Lift up your heart to God with a gentle stirring of love. Focus on him alone. Want him, and not anything he's made. Think on nothing but him. Don't let anything else run through your mind and will."

Solitude and silence are, if not mandatory prerequisites, certainly helpful conditions for practicing contemplative prayer. You can see why contemplative prayer appealed to a stressed-out mom who felt that she never got to be alone. It sounded very peaceful; it sounded a lot like what I was missing, in fact. So I planned to begin practicing contemplative prayer on January 1. Starting a new year with a

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renewed commitment to the spiritual disciplines may have been annoyingly New Year's resolution-y, but it also helped to add a bit of gravitas to the whole thing. As a practiced procrastinator, I knew if I didn't have a firm date, I'd put it off until Ben went to college.

### **Are You There, God? It's Me, Julia**

Foster writes in *Prayer* that we don't have to pray all the time, that just a few minutes in God's presence can be refreshing and wonderful enough for those who are unused to it. It is probably a good indicator of the confidence I had in my contemplative ability that I took him at his word and decided to set an initial goal of only five minutes. To help me out, my husband, Ryan, took Ben with him on an errand so I could have a rare moment of peace and quiet in the house. Although I knew I should get started right away, I found myself delaying. First it seemed imperative that I listen to the Indigo Girls and Bono singing "Kid Fears" on iTunes. Then I had to figure out where to sit. The floor was too cold so I got up and fetched a blanket. Then, once I was wrapped in the blanket, I worried I would fall asleep, which, since Ben had yet to sleep through the night, was a real possibility anytime I was seated. I had literally fallen asleep while reading him a Thomas the Tank Engine story. When I finally settled into my office chair and closed my eyes, I tried to make my mind a blank screen for God to put an image or word or memory on, a technique I had read about.

I repeated the word "Jesus" a few times. It was quiet; all I heard was traffic and the occasional airplane. I enjoyed the silence but found myself a little tense, expecting that at any moment Ryan and Ben would walk in and shatter it. I also had to fight the urge to write down everything I was thinking or craft it into acceptable prose in

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my head. My thoughts jumped from an upcoming writing deadline to wondering whether or not I might be pregnant again. I thought about an episode I'd just watched of the TV show *House*, the plotline of which got me thinking about my public identity as a Christian. Then I wondered if thinking about TV shows was a sign that I should return to repeating "Jesus." The trouble was that I had no idea what thoughts were distractions and which might be guided thoughts from God.

I opened my eyes, thinking I had probably been sitting there much longer than my allotted five minutes. Nope. Two minutes. As I stared at the computer clock in disbelief, I heard Ryan and Ben return home.

The next day, I tried again, aiming for a whopping ten minutes this time. Ryan offered to time it for me so I wouldn't peek at the clock or worry about whether I'd gone too long or not long enough. In a letter to one of her many students, early twentieth-century writer Evelyn Underhill gives some practical advice for contemplative prayer, which I was trying my best to follow:

*1. Put yourself into some position so easy and natural to you that you don't notice your body: and shut your eyes.*

Clearly, even this first step didn't come easily for me. I had spent more time deciding where and how to sit yesterday than I'd actually spent praying. This time I went straight for my office chair, but again I found myself shifting and changing positions several times. I was worse than my dog, nudging and circling her bed before she settled down. Finally, I settled into a cross-legged position, what my son would call *crisscross applesauce*.

*2. Represent to your mind, some phrase, truth, dogma, event—e.g., a phrase of the Paternoster or Anima Christi, the Passion, the Nativity*

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*are the sort of things I use. Something that occurs naturally. Now, don't think about it, but keep it before you, turning it over as it were, as you might finger some precious possession.*

I wasn't quite as theologically sophisticated as Evelyn Underhill; I wasn't even 100 percent sure what she meant by "Anima Christi." But using nothing more complicated than "Jesus" seemed to work for me. I loved this idea of keeping his name before me as I might a precious possession, so I started by repeating his name aloud.

*3. Deliberately, and by an act of will, shut yourself off from your senses. Don't attend to touch or hearing; till the external world seems unreal and far away. Still holding on to your idea, turn your attention inwards . . . and allow yourself to sink, as it were, downwards and downwards, into the profound silence and peace which is the essence of the meditative state. More you cannot do for yourself: if you get further, you will do so automatically as a consequence of the above practice. It is the "shutting off the senses" and what Boehme calls the "stopping [of] the wheel of the imagination and ceasing from self-thinking" that is hard at first.*

I tried to sink inward and downward as she instructed and found that it came a little more easily. Already I felt more comfortable with letting thoughts come to me and then letting go of them when I felt ready, repeating "Jesus" when I thought I needed to return to center. I found myself thinking about my writing. I had been working for years on a fiction project, but all my paid work had been in nonfiction. I felt nudged toward the conclusion that this success in nonfiction writing was because that was where God wanted me to be, at least for now. When Ryan came in and told me that the ten minutes were up, I was surprised. I had been enjoying myself, not feeling restless at all.

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And so it went with my contemplative prayer practice. Some days I never managed to get to it at all. Other days I found it incredibly difficult to sit still and even harder to still my brain, which insisted on running through my list of things to do. I realized that as much as I thought I wanted to pray more, I was having a hard time convincing myself to prioritize it over everything else that I had to do—clean the house, pay bills, do dishes, meet my writing deadlines. When I finally managed to take the time and relax in prayer, I often found myself thinking of the strangest things, like Mary’s song from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, “I Don’t Know How to Love Him.” I had heard that dreams were the brain’s way of taking out the trash. Was this also true of contemplative prayer?

I still struggled with the question of whether I was hearing God’s voice or just my own. There were no easy answers to this question. Dallas Willard explains that it is experience that helps us discern when it is “just me” or when it is God’s voice. The only solution, it seemed, was to spend more time listening.

### **What Works for Me**

#### **Andrea, literary agent and mother of two**

I’ve been reading John Baillie’s *A Diary of Private Prayer*, which includes morning and evening prayers that help me begin and end each day alert to God’s presence. Of course, we’re never absent from God, but with so many demands on my time, it can be a challenge to stay aware. Setting aside even a few moments for prayer and silence has helped me develop a more holistic stance toward life, where I know that I’m connected to God even in the mundane and busy parts of my day.

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I soon discovered a few ways to ease more naturally into contemplative prayer. It helped when I set a timer or when someone else timed it for me. Otherwise, I engaged more in clock-watching than listening. And it worked better when I didn't try it toward the end of naptime, because otherwise I spent every minute of prayer bracing for a wail to break my concentration. Practice and consistency did make a difference. When I prayed every day, it seemed to come much more easily. Missing a day or two, on the other hand, seemed to make it that much harder to settle down to prayer the next time.

Then it all went wrong.

### **No Nap, No Prayer**

It started innocently enough. Ben climbed out of the Pack 'n Play that had been his bed for the first two years of his life, so Ryan and I took him to IKEA for that toddler rite of passage: a big-boy bed. But now that he could get out of his bed anytime he wanted, he was no longer napping. At all. Those naps of his had been brief, but the short lulls they provided often felt like the time I needed to keep the house and myself together, not to mention my time for contemplative prayer. Without the naps, both Ben and I were increasingly short of temper. I found myself praying in the moment all the time, mostly for patience and for forgiveness when I lost it. What little contemplative prayer practice I'd managed had helped me get back in the routine of talking to God, but I still felt as though I had failed.

Since I no longer had naptime available for contemplative prayer, it occurred to me that I could try it at night. The time after Ben went to bed was my highly anticipated "free time," even though I often used it for very odd things. (If there are other people in the world who clean the burners at 2 a.m., I suspect they are also mothers of small

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children.) One night after I'd cleaned up the kitchen, I settled into my office chair and closed my eyes. To my surprise, I didn't find myself falling asleep, as I so often did when I tried to pray in bed. Maybe the key was as simple as praying while remaining upright.

It went well that night, yet I didn't feel I could consistently add a nightly contemplative prayer experience to my already packed post-Ben's-bedtime hours. For one thing, those hours were already getting crunched. Ben's bedtime was currently a very long game of "Go back to bed," with Ben hopping gleefully out of his new bed as soon as we left the room and poking his head into the hallway like a blond jack-rabbit. And at some point I, too, needed to go to bed.

I had enjoyed spending quiet time with God. I still loved the idea of listening to God and the surprising thoughts that answered my call. I liked even more the revelation that it was something I could do at nighttime, which had always been my favorite set of hours. But I just couldn't seem to manage it right now, and I was starting to wonder if I had erred in choosing it in the first place. In *Prayer*, Foster writes that a lot of people avoid simple prayer (talking with God about all things, good and bad) in favor of more "sophisticated" types of prayer, and that this fallacy is often committed by those who don't really pray. Maybe I had started with contemplative prayer for the wrong reasons, maybe because it sounded more sophisticated, more intellectual.

Sometimes when something comes only with great difficulty, you are meant to keep pushing until you master it. Other times, it is a sign that you are climbing the wrong hill.

### **Praying the Examen**

The next kind of prayer on my list was the prayer of Examen, first developed by Ignatius of Loyola, a sixteenth-century Christian

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leader. The central idea is of reflecting on, or examining, your day. Father Dennis Hamm, SJ, describes praying the Examen as “rummaging for God,” an image I liked. There are many versions of the Examen, but the simplified one I decided to try involved two main parts. First, you review the day with the intention of finding Christ in it. In whom did you see Christ? Where in your day did you experience his nearness? Then, second, you try to open your heart to being examined and corrected by God. When in your day had you strayed from Christ? When were you far away from him? I still hadn’t given up hope that I could pray at night, and one of the Examen’s major selling points was that not only could I do it lying in bed at night, it was probably even better to do it then, so I could review the entire day. Somehow, the idea of praying in those last few minutes before sleep made it feel less like another thing to check off my to-do list, and I hoped that having an agenda would help keep me awake. Besides, I had never appreciated my bed as much as I had post-baby. I was so tired from still getting up with Ben once or twice most nights and early in the morning that when *my* bedtime came each night, I sank into bed with the most delicious feeling of relief and gratitude. I was primed for prayer.

That first night, I lay down and asked myself where I had seen Christ. Right away I thought of Ben’s preschool teachers and how lovingly they had said good-bye to Ben when I picked him up. I thought of the kindness some bank employees had shown us that evening, when they’d stayed late to honor our requests. And I thought of both Ryan and Ben.

What was most surprising about reflecting on these ways I had seen Christ was how joyful it made me feel. Although in my own haphazard prayers, and in prayers before bedtimes and mealtimes with

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Ben, I listed things for which to be thankful and to praise God, it felt different to focus instead on where Christ had been in our day. It made me think about the reality of Christ working in our world, and what was more hope-giving than dwelling on that?

As for thinking about where I had strayed from Christ, I came up with the usual: be more patient with Ben. I asked for forgiveness and resolved to do better.

I continued to pray the Examen every night before bed. I loved that I didn't have to time this kind of prayer. Often I could pray it very quickly and still feel as though I had spent quality time with God. Other times I spent quite a while thinking about specific ways in which I had strayed. I started to view each Examen as a strategy session with God, where we worked together to try to figure out how to handle things differently the next time. My failings were numerous, and again, most of them had to do with Ben, with losing patience or yelling or feeling frustrated with him. But reflecting on them in this way was not as painful as I had expected because the context of the Examen felt more about forgiveness and moving on than about shame and punishment. Instead, I actually felt grateful for God's showing me these failings and helping me think about how to do better. Those little strategy sessions seemed to help too. I found myself feeling more patient and calm during the day. And I continued to find it rewarding and joyful to think about the ways Christ entered my life, most often through Ben, my husband, my friends, and Ben's teachers, but also through nature, through books, and through brief interactions with people at the grocery store or on the street. It was surprising how much of God I found in these most mundane of events. Reflecting on God's presence at the end of each day seemed more realistic than expecting myself to practice the awareness all day long. And at the same

time, the nightly examining helped me become more aware of God's presence as I moved through the day.

## Asking God

I had always planned to continue to add each new type of prayer to my existing practice, like building blocks in a prayer wall. How exactly this would work, I wasn't sure—whether I would do contemplative prayer on Tuesdays or Thursdays and the Examen Monday, Wednesday, and Friday or what. I hadn't planned exactly when I would switch from one type to the next either. With my typical seat-of-my-pants planning, I just figured I'd put them together in whatever way seemed to work best at the time.

I continued to pray the Examen at night, but I became aware of a feeling of restlessness, a sense of needing more. This restlessness seemed like a nudge from the Holy Spirit to face the last kind of prayer I wanted to try—the one I'd been putting off: petitionary prayer, or asking God.

I don't know why I had such complicated feelings about making requests of God. The Bible is full of examples of Jesus telling us that if we ask, we will receive. Even within the Lord's Prayer he instructed us to ask God for our daily bread, but the example that I always came back to was Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane just before he was arrested. I like the wording in Mark best, where Jesus says, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want." This passage was one of my very favorites for what it said about Jesus, about God, and about the lengths they would go to out of their love for us. But what did it tell us about prayer? Jesus asks but doesn't ask. Instead, he acquiesces to God's will. And even though, as noted above, Jesus

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said we will receive whatever we ask for, we also read in James 4:3 about people who did not receive what they asked for because they asked with wrong motives.

So I concluded that we were to ask but also to be cautious that our requests were in line with God's will, and that caveat stressed me out—did God even care about a lot of the little things I fretted over? Agnes Sanford writes, “When we pray in accordance with the law of love, we are praying in accordance with the will of God.” Helpful words but, like so many wise words about prayer, awfully vague. I had even more questions. Should I pray by lifting my concerns up in a general sense and asking God to guide me, or boldly ask for very specific things? Both?

I was finally helped by reading how Richard Foster went through the entire New Testament and noted each instance of Jesus praying or teaching about prayer. Foster realized that when Jesus prayed for other people, he always prayed with utter confidence that his request would be granted. It was only when Jesus prayed for himself, as in the garden of Gethsemane, that he added the caveat about God's will being done rather than Jesus' own. It is hard to overstate how helpful this teaching was for me. I grew much more confident in praying for other people, even in ways that had previously made me uncomfortable, from laying my hand on a pregnant friend and asking that her twins be delivered safely to praying that another close friend become pregnant. But, following Foster's insight, I still felt hesitant about asking for such things for myself, so I decided to focus my prayers on petitions for others.

Foster advises to start small, not with stage 4 cancer, for example, and not to expect big results at first. As I thought about where to start asking for others, I struggled to put aside my own overriding concern—how crunched I was for work time. I depended on the couple of hours

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Ben was in preschool three days a week for writing time, but he'd woken up with yellow gunk streaming steadily from his nose, and I knew he'd have to miss at least two days of school. I felt anxiety threatening to overwhelm me as I started calculating how far back these missed hours would set me. I had never been able to work with Ben at home, unless he was asleep. He wanted and needed my attention, especially when he wasn't feeling well, of course, so I had to chalk those hours up to mommy time rather than work time. I felt powerless and frustrated, knowing that I'd have to stay up until the wee hours in order to catch up.

It was one of the most difficult things to get used to about motherhood, the way even a runny nose completely derailed my writing schedule. I felt incredibly lucky to be able to work from home because I could be with Ben almost all the time and still keep a job I loved. But juggling mommyhood and working at home sometimes blew up in my face. I'd plan out my writing time, and then it would disappear before my eyes like an evil conjuring trick. *Poof!*

Ben's illness, it seemed, was a perfect opportunity for petitionary prayer. But I had set the goal of praying for other people's needs rather than my own. Of course I wanted him to feel well because I loved him and hated to see him suffer, but mostly I wanted him to be better so I could meet my deadline . . . and I knew it.

Instead, that night I prayed that my constantly sleep-deprived husband would have a restful and refreshing night's sleep, knowing that he would have to get up at 5 a.m. the next day, Saturday, and first go to work and then teach a class at a local university where he was an adjunct professor. These Saturday classes were hard on him. Afterward, he routinely came home, turned on a soccer game, and fell asleep on the couch for a good part of the afternoon. I asked God

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for Ryan to feel rested and strong. It seemed like a good example of starting small and of praying for someone else's need.

This focus on praying for someone else, per Jesus' example, seemed especially important right then because I felt so panicky and overwhelmed about my own needs—that I wouldn't meet my deadline, that I wouldn't get the house looking halfway decent for my parents' and Ryan's parents' upcoming visits, that I wouldn't be able to manage this poor sick little guy. I hoped that praying for someone else would help me to stop feeling sorry for myself. And the prayer did seem successful. Ryan told me the class went very well, and the one who fell asleep on the couch that afternoon was me, not him!

But it didn't seem to prevent me from wallowing in my own problems. My next deadline was now only a week away, and writing time was not miraculously appearing. Something we enjoyed doing as a family was going to Ryan's rec league soccer games on Sunday nights and then out to dinner. I'd never missed a game before, but I was so far behind that I finally called a friend and asked him to sit with Ben at the game so I could stay home and work.

Feeling sad and frustrated over having to sacrifice family time, I nonetheless wrote until 2 a.m., and as I dragged my groggy self out of bed Monday morning, I thought again about the night before. I had focused so much on the fact that I had to miss the game that I'd nearly missed the fact that I was lucky enough to have a friend who could take Ben to the game so I could have writing time and Ben didn't have to miss out. Plus, Ben seemed well enough to go to school that day, and, truthfully, that made me feel better about everything. While he was there, I finished an entire section of the book. That meant I had only two more sections to go before my February 1 deadline, and I finally felt like it was within reach. Had God heard my anxiety even

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though I had been trying not to pray deliberately for my own needs? All I knew for sure was that I was grateful.

### **Bullying God**

The next couple of days, however, Ben seemed sicker. His nose was running again, and he had a terrible cough. In the midst of his illness, I found myself turning to a prayer by Martin Luther titled “For Assurance of Being Heard”:

Lord God, heavenly Father, I ask for and need assurance that my petitions may be nothing less than yes and amen. Otherwise I will not pray or have intercession made for me. Not that I am righteous or worthy, for I know very well and confess that I am unworthy. With my great and many sins I have earned your eternal wrath and hell fire.

But because you command and constrain me to pray in the name of your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, I am still somewhat obedient. Not because of my own righteousness, but because of your infinite goodness, do I kneel or stand before you. I pray for what is upon my heart concerning those in need of your help. If you do not help them, O Lord, you will offend and dishonor your name. Surely you will save your reputation so that the world will not say you are an ungracious and a dreadful God. Preserve us from such misfortune.

Remember, dear heavenly Father, how you have at all times supported and helped your people. I will not stop knocking but will continue crying aloud and pleading to the end of my life. Amen.

Was Martin Luther actually bullying God? Was that allowed? Was *this* what it meant to ask boldly? I would never have thought of addressing God that way, yet I couldn't help but notice that Luther matched his

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boldness with such humility. And that last line about continuing to cry aloud reminded me how much I've always loved (and been more than a little awed by) the idea that we as Christians have the privilege of helping God with his Kingdom work. Praying was one important way of doing so.

The next day Ben had to miss school again. We were practically out the door, both dressed and ready to go, when I looked at his still-streaming nose and thought, *I can't*. Then I burst into tears, not because I was missing work time, but because it was the day of the once-a-year Art Experience where parents were invited to attend with their children and spend all morning working on art projects together. I couldn't believe we had to miss it. It seemed as if this cold would never end.

We played for a while, read books, and then I settled him into his bed for a nap. (The one benefit of this cold was that it had brought back the naps.) I went into my office and came before God with my petitions again. First I thanked God for hearing my prayer for Ryan since I had noticed that he seemed to be more rested. I wondered if I was being presumptuous in assuming any perceived change was due to my prayer, but I chalked such thoughts up to my inner cynic. When in doubt, thank.

Now that Ben and I had already missed the special art class and he didn't have school for a few days, I felt more confident about praying for his cold, that I didn't have to worry so much about my motives. I tiptoed into his room and hovered awkwardly above him, listening to his congested breathing, and prayed silently for God to heal him, specifically to clear his nose and take away that horrible cough. Tears pricked at my eyes and then rolled down my cheeks as I prayed. I wasn't sure exactly why I got so emotional, maybe because it was a

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tender thing to do for my sick little boy. I wanted to speak the words aloud and lay my hand on his head, but I was afraid I'd wake him up.

Later, I repeated my prayer, this time aloud. I had realized that when I had a prayer agenda—specific requests I wanted to bring before God—praying aloud helped tremendously. After all, there's a reason why liturgical prayers have been around for so long. Reciting words aloud to God can help us edit our thoughts and focus better. My head was such a crowded and disorganized place. When I prayed silently, it seemed that my mind would leap off on a tangent before I'd completed even one thought. Perhaps some of this tangentialism was God-led, but I suspected that when my thoughts moved from praise to my grocery list, it was probably more about me than God. Praying aloud helped cut out almost all these extraneous thoughts.

After I asked aloud for God's healing, I decided to add Luther's prayer for good measure. That middle part of the prayer still felt awkward, like I was picking a fight with God, but I couldn't stop thinking about the ending: "Remember, dear heavenly Father, how you have at all times supported and helped your people. I will not stop knocking but will continue crying aloud and pleading to the end of my life. Amen." Luther's words took me back to Matthew 7:7-8: "Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened."

Why couldn't I just ask? Why did I have to overthink everything all the time? Why couldn't I just take it to God and let God decide how to answer or deal with it? All my worries showed was a lack of faith. So I tried to let go of my overthinking and offered two more petitions: for one close friend to get pregnant and for another to find a good mate. I found myself saying "Lord" over and over, in the middle and at

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the end of every sentence, the kind of repetition that bugs me when I hear myself do it aloud. It's like some sort of evangelical tic. But in that moment it felt right, as a way to focus my thoughts on God.

I continued praying for these three requests, and Ben recovered from his cold. I certainly saw an improvement after I prayed over him at his bedside. That prayer had felt powerful in a way my previous prayers hadn't. I also found out that the friend I had prayed would find a mate went on a date a few days later. But there didn't seem to be any long-term results for him or for my friend hoping to conceive, which I guess wasn't really all that surprising. After all, with both of those requests I had disregarded Foster's advice about starting small.

I had struggled so much with what to ask that I found praying for people without words to be particularly helpful. Instead of asking for something specific, I simply pictured them with God's light and peace shining on them.

Just the act of praying, however, had helped me overcome some of my doubts about the purpose of prayer and some of my worries about praying the wrong thing. Like so many other practices, it was the doing that mattered, not the dithering around about doing it properly. The more I did it, the less I worried about doing it wrong.

I had to stop categorizing my prayer practice as a success or a failure. (And for that matter, I needed to stop applying those labels to myself.) Just because a time of prayer didn't result in a nice neat answer or a deep theological insight didn't mean God wasn't using that time to work in me or do other work I wasn't even aware of. As Evelyn Underhill writes about prayer, "It is quite possible to obtain spiritual nourishment without being consciously aware of it."

Despite my doubts about the why and how of asking, I had never wavered in my conviction that prayer had the power to change *me*,

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and petitionary prayer was a particularly powerful method. The more seeking and knocking I did, the more naturally it came and the more petitions God seemed to bring to my attention. Petitionary prayer appeared to be not only necessary but healthy for me, since it forced me to focus on other people's needs. In fact, I realized that contemplative prayer, the Examen, and petitionary prayer had all helped me shift my focus from myself to God.

Perhaps more important, these prayers helped me get over my own propensity to worry rather than do.

So many of us spend more time feeling guilty about not praying than we actually spend praying. What if, every time we thought about God or prayer, instead of feeling guilty about not doing it more, we just prayed? What if, instead of worrying about the type of prayer or whether we're doing it right, we just prayed?

Virtually all personal correspondence begins with an apology for not writing sooner. When you receive a letter or an e-mail, do you want to dwell on how long it's been since the person wrote and their reasons for not doing so, or are you just excited to hear from them and to read the letter? Which way do you think God feels when we reach out in prayer, even after a long absence?

The people who are best at prayer almost universally advise us to stop feeling bad about it. Yes, we will forget, but Thomas R. Kelly, in *A Testament of Devotion*, recommends that we just forgive ourselves and move on. Brother Lawrence says that when his attention was drawn away from God, that God simply recalled it not with punishment but with a delightful sensation, and Brother Lawrence was only too happy to comply, remembering how miserable he had felt without God.

When you think of God, pray. Eventually, it becomes a habit.

## **Non-Expert Tips for Practicing Prayer**

1. Plan to do it when you're at your best, and if that's at 2 a.m., then you'll probably have a nice uninterrupted prayer time.
2. Start with just a few minutes in God's presence. Really. And if you can do thirty minutes the first time, I don't want to know about it.
3. Try not to judge your results too much. Well, try not to.
4. If you are worried about having the right words to bring a petition before God, just picture God's light and peace shining over that person.
5. If you forget for a day or a week or a month, just forgive yourself and try again. God will still be there.
6. Stop obsessing about it. Just do it. Repeat.