

NEVER LOSE HEART

Robert Maloney CM

HOW LORD
SHOULD WE
PRAY?

LET US COUNT THE
(15) WAYS.

PRAY ALWAYS? NEVER LOSE HEART?

Like the wandering Russian in *The Way of the Pilgrim*, I am startled whenever I read the words of Luke's Gospel: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and never lose heart" (Lk 18:1). Pray always? Never lose heart?

But it's not just Luke. Paul says it too: "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess 5:16-18). And to emphasize the message, Paul repeats it: "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people" (Eph 6:18).

By no means is this an unheard message. Again and again I have been struck by how earnestly people want to pray. Lots of young people are curious about prayer. Recently, at a party after a baptism, two relatives asked me what I was doing next. I told them that I was giving a two-day workshop on meditative prayer. Both said spontaneously: "I'd love to learn to pray better."

So, from my own struggles to pray, I offer these few suggestions, hoping that they will be of help to young people and to anyone who is eager to know God more deeply. They are not abstract principles that I can prove by some scientific method. They are simply 15 practical suggestions that people who pray have found helpful. I take responsibility for their formulation, but I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the good people—"saints" canonized and not—who have taught them to me by their example and wisdom.

Spend at least 10-15 minutes with the Lord each day in silent, meditative prayer. This is not an easy commitment to keep in the midst of a busy schedule at home or at work or at school, but, I assure you, it will slowly change your life. When you feel that you're too busy to do it, ask yourself: don't I spend more time than that in eating, sleeping, working or exercising?

Can't I find 10 to 15 minutes to be with the Lord?





Find a time and a place that suits you. Both are important. Choose a time when you can be alone. Choose a place where, in the words of Matthew's Gospel (6:6), you can shut the door on the noise of the world. There, listen attentively and speak with the Lord simply. Read a small passage from the scriptures, if you like, and say to the Lord, as did Samuel (1 Sam 3:10), "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

What do you want me to do right now?"

Make Christ the center. We can be certain of this: the word that God most wants to speak to us is the Word Made Flesh. St. Teresa of Avila tells us that her only subject of meditation was the humanity of Jesus, because in Jesus God is revealed in the flesh. As Christian pray-ers, we want our instincts to become those of Jesus. We yearn to think as he did, feel as he did, love as he did, and act as he did. Basically, the scriptures and the saints say this: do you want to know God? Look to Jesus, “the self-giving one” (Gal 1:4). He is the “way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6).



In the morning, dedicate the day to the Lord, asking God's blessing on its main events. The saints offer us many striking prayers well suited for the morning, like that of St. Ignatius:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and call my own.

You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. All is yours. Dispose of it wholly according to your will. Give me only your love and grace. That is enough for me.



Night is a time for quiet and for peaceful sleep. Before retiring, make a brief examination of conscience. Look back over the day. Ask yourself, when did I love? When did I fail to love? What patterns do I see in my life? Be attentive to both the positive and the negative, the lights and the shadows. Thank the Lord for the day's gifts and ask pardon and healing for your failures. Commend yourself to the Lord, placing your life in his hands. Some find journaling at the end of the day a helpful means for growing in the Lord's life and in gratitude for God's gifts. A long tradition in the church ends the day with a Marian prayer, like the "Hail, Holy Queen."



Do not focus too much on what you say. What God is communicating is much more important. Prayer is a relationship. While words have a privileged place in it, communication goes far beyond words. Some of its deepest forms are non-verbal. Those who are in love often spend significant periods of time together while saying very little. “Mere” presence is a sign of fidelity. Jesus, in fact, warns us against the multiplication of words in prayer (Mt 6:7). St. John Chrysostom compares the mindless rattling of words to the barking of dogs!



Be disciplined. Just as constant practice trains the athlete, the musician and the dancer for their sport or art, so also faithfulness in setting aside time and entering a quiet space enables the pray-er to grow in the Lord's life. Whether you choose to rise early in the morning or pick the evening as your best prayer time, some renunciation is inevitable. Today, when there are so are many diversions that can easily distract us from prayer time, we must at times renounce good, interesting alternatives in order to be faithful prayers.





Blend discipline with inner freedom, structure with spontaneity. Saints like Vincent de Paul teach us that, at times, we must “leave God for God.” It is important to structure our lives so that we pray daily. Yet, when emergencies arise, calling us to respond to the urgent needs of others, we should not hesitate to see, listen to and serve the Lord in the needy who cry out to us.

Learn to be quiet. Meditative prayer demands silent moments. Obviously, we cannot cut ourselves off from our family, our community, our work, or the contacts of daily life. But we can choose a time and a space in which noise and interruptions are unlikely, when phones and doorbells will not be ringing. That is one of the reasons why, historically, many have chosen to pray early in the morning before the day's activities begin or later in the evening when things have slowed down. Dietrich Bonhoeffer states: "Silence is nothing else but waiting for God's Word." Isaiah writes:
Each morning he wakes me to hear, to listen like a disciple.
The Lord Yahweh has opened my ear (50:4-5).



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Get nourishment.

Reading is vitally important. Some of the principal elements in the diet are sacred scripture, the lives and writings of the saints, contemporary spiritual literature, and reflective contact with Christ in the person of the poor.

Work at renewed self-definition. Through prayer, our values should become redefined and take on an increasingly evangelical character. Prayer should lead to continued conversion. It should result in acts of charity and justice. This is why many saints insist on “practical resolutions.” The ultimate criterion for assessing prayer is always life: “By their fruits you shall know them” (Mt 7:20, 12:33; Lk 6:44). In the end, prayer should bear fruit in joy. Paul describes the fruits of the Spirit clearly: love, joy, peace, patience (Gal 5:22).



Do not hesitate to use prayer of petition, but develop a broader prayer repertoire. Prayer of petition makes us conscious of how needy we are. But our prayer should also take on other biblical “moods”: praise, gratitude, wonder, confidence, anguish, abandonment, resignation. Typically Christian prayer is filled with thanksgiving.



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Pray for the courage to accept and to do God's will, as Jesus recommends (Mt 6:10) and models (Lk 22:42). In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky wrote: "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams." The saints recommended, as a predisposition for prayer, "indifference." By this they meant a willingness to move in whatever direction God is calling. This is especially important in times of pain, crisis or discernment.



Be creative. Since, as human beings, we have bodies, physical and environmental conditions help or inhibit our prayer. The beauty of the setting, a tabernacle, an image, a candle, incense, lighting, music—all can be aids to praying. Some use icons to help them focus. Some play gentle music in the background, using their iPad or the CD player on their computer. Some pray as they drive, shutting off the radio. Some pray while they walk or stand in line waiting. In prayer, there are many ways, fitting different personalities.



Don't worry about distractions. They are inevitable. The mind is incapable of concentrating on a single object over long periods of time. When distractions are persistent, it is best to focus on them, rather than flee from them, and to make them a topic of our conversation with the Lord. They often say a lot about what is going on inside us.

The search for God is a life-long journey, in which we climb mountains, descend into valleys and sometimes get stuck on ledges. Perseverance is the key to arriving at the top of the mountain. Yearning to pray is itself praying.

Mother Teresa said that she spent years struggling to find God, though she took part faithfully in prayer all that time.

Sometimes we may feel that we are “wasting time” in prayer, or we may experience long-lasting “dryness” and be tempted to quit.

We should resist the temptation.

The journey will bring great rewards.

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