



PRAYING WITH A PRAYER WORD

In this lesson, each person will select a prayer word to focus on for the meditation.

OVERVIEW

An introduction to praying with a prayer word as taught by the 14th century spiritual classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Scripture

LUKE 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

PSALM 119:9-16

How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.
With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
Blessed are you, O Lord;
teach me your statutes.
With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.

Quotations

Why do you suppose that this little prayer of one syllable is powerful enough to pierce the heavens? Well, it is because it is the prayer

of a man's whole being... In itself, prayer is simply a reverent, conscious openness to God full of the desire to grow in goodness and overcome evil... Let this little word represent to you God in all his fullness and nothing less than the fullness of God. Let nothing except God hold sway in your mind and heart.

— *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. William Johnston (New York: Image, 1973), 85-89

Introducing the Practice

In the 14th century, an anonymous English mystic wrote a treatise on contemplative prayer called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. While there is a rich, expansive tradition of mystical theology in Christianity since the earliest Christian theologians, it is rare to come across a text that's purpose is so clearly practical. The author of *The Cloud* did not set out to write a treatise on mystical theology but rather a practical guide to contemplative prayer. Throughout the text, he provides spiritual guidance to a student of contemplative prayer with specific directions and instructions. Underlying the practical guidance, we see a deeply mystical theology that understands God to be beyond all intellectual knowledge and conceptualizations. Because God is infinitely greater than our rational minds can understand, it is ultimately most appropriate to seek God with our hearts in love rather than with our minds in thought. This assertion does not cause the author to reject any traditional Christian doctrines or ideas about God; the normal Christian ways of speaking about and worshipping God are still of the utmost importance. Contemplation arises from the foundation of traditional Christian doctrines and teachings, but it rises above these to an encounter with God in the silence of the cloud where all images and conceptualizations of God are suspended. The author maintains that his teachings are not techniques to achieve contemplation – for contemplation is a gift from God alone and cannot be earned by our efforts – but the teachings are rather to prepare oneself for contemplation by actively waiting upon and consenting to God in love.

In *The Cloud* the author suggests that his student use a prayer word in order to ground his contemplative prayer. Silence is of great importance in prayer, but we can often be led astray by temptations, thoughts, and daydreams in silence. The prayer word is a tool to lead one into the silent presence of God. It represents one's intention for God. The prayer word is recited when distractions arise in order to reorient our minds and hearts to God. It need not be continuously recited, but it should be used whenever one needs to refocus one's intention on God. Additionally, because so much of our lives are taken up by fast-paced mental and physical activity, we can sometimes fall into a state of great relaxation when we take time for silent prayer if it is the only quiet and rest we get in our busy days. Though this prayer encompasses silence of thought and activity, it is nevertheless marked by an active openness and alertness to God. We should beware of the moments where we fall into a very relaxed state because it is in these moments that we easily slip away from prayer and into daydream or simple rest. When we find ourselves in such a relaxed state, we should once again introduce the prayer word to refocus our intention on God and remind ourselves to stay alert.

Preparing for the Practice

Have everyone spread out to find a comfortable place to sit where they can still hear the voice of the person guiding the practice.

Everyone will need to choose a prayer word before beginning the practice. Your word should be very simple and only consist of one or two syllables. This word is intended to represent your desire for God's presence and should therefore not be anything too complicated or thought provoking. It is suggested that you use a name of God that is comfortable for you. Some examples would be "God," "Jesus," "Spirit," "Love," "Peace," or anything else that speaks to you.

The Spiritual Practice

Find a comfortable place to sit and gently close your eyes. Slow your breathing and bring your mind to the present moment as you prepare for a time of prayer.

As you begin this time of prayer, silently recite your sacred word as a symbol of your openness to God. This sacred word is used to ground you in your intention for God. It does not need to be continuously repeated. You should only come back to this word when you find that your thoughts have wandered, you have become distracted, or you need to reorient your prayer in an alert intention for God. This sacred word is your grounding, your beacon of light, and your compass in the silence. Use it only when you need something to bring you back to the intention of this prayer and to lead you into a silent resting in the presence of God.

Duration: 15-20 minutes

Discussion Questions

1. What did you think of this method of prayer? How was your experience of it?
2. Did you find your prayer word helpful in orienting your intention towards God during this prayer? How did you use your prayer word?
3. How do you think this practice fits with the other aspects of our Christian faith?