



## THE JESUS PRAYER

Meditation reciting the Jesus prayer.

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## OVERVIEW

Introduction to the tradition of reciting the Jesus Prayer and evoking the Holy Name of Jesus.

## MATERIALS

Rosaries or strings of prayer beads (if possible)

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## Scripture

### LUKE 18:9-14

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

### 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

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## Quotations

“To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing, within you.”

— *St. Theophan the Recluse*

“Acquire a peaceful spirit, and thousands around you will be saved.”

— *St. Seraphim of Sarav*

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## Introducing the Practice

Within Orthodox Christian monasticism, there is a long tradition of what is called inner prayer or

prayer of the heart. Though we modern Westerners usually speak of the heart as merely a physical organ or sometimes as the center of our emotions, there is a grander understanding of the heart at work in this tradition of the prayer of the heart. Kallistos Ware describes the heart as “the primary organ of man’s being, whether physical or spiritual; it is the centre of life, the determining principle of all our activities and aspirations. As such, the heart obviously includes the affections and emotions, but it also includes much else besides: it embraces in effect everything that goes to comprise what we call a ‘person’.” Prayer of the heart, then, is when we pray from the very center of our being. It is when we bring our entire person before God in loving communion.

The specific prayer most associated with the prayer of the heart is the Jesus Prayer. This simple prayer reads, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Have Mercy on Me.” The words of this prayer are founded in the Gospel, and some teachers say that the prayer is itself a full summary of the Gospel. In the first part, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” one gives glory and adoration to God by recognizing Jesus as Lord and Son of God. In the second part, “Have Mercy on Me,” one recognizes their own human sin and the need for God’s grace. Asking for God’s mercy, in this tradition, is about more than just forgiveness. While it certainly encompasses forgiveness for sins, there is a greater notion of God as the Divine Physician who heals all our human brokenness. Asking for God’s mercy is a way of asking both for forgiveness for our sins and healing for our wounds.

By continuously reciting this prayer, one is said to “descend with the mind into the heart,” bringing together the center of intellect and the center of love within oneself. Some Orthodox Christian monks will recite the Jesus Prayer hundreds or even thousands of times a day for years on end. By this continuous recitation, the prayer is said to become ingrained in the core of one’s very being. In this way, Orthodox monks teach that one is able to “pray without ceasing” as St. Paul asks of us in 1 Thessalonians. There are many incredible writings on the power of the Jesus Prayer, and the experiences of monks who have devoted their lives to this prayer are nothing short of incredible.

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## 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. Though not required for this practice, if you have rosaries available you may choose to pass one out to each person to use with this prayer, instructing them to recite the Jesus Prayer once on each bead or knot.

When you have gathered yourselves and are ready to begin, open this time by reading the Scripture passage for this lesson. Beginning our time of prayer and meditation with Scripture grounds our practice in the foundations of our tradition. You may then go on to read any of the quotations from this lesson’s saints. These readings will help to prepare our hearts and minds for the spiritual practice that follows.

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## The Spiritual Practice

Find a quiet place to sit apart from others.  
Close your eyes, as you center yourself and prepare for a time of prayer.

Slow your breathing, and bring your mind into a place of rest in your heart.  
*(silent pause)*

Now as you inhale, say the words “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God”

And as you exhale, say the words “Have mercy on me.”

You may say these words softly out loud, mouth them silently with your lips, or say them silently in your mind. Continue to do this with each breath.

When you notice that your mind has wandered or distracting thoughts have entered in, simply bring your attention back to the words of this prayer and the rhythm they form with your breath.

*Duration: 15-20 minutes*

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## Discussion Questions

- What was your experience of this prayer like?
- What do you think of the tradition in Orthodox monasticism where monks say this prayer thousands of times every day until it settles into the subconscious workings of their heart?