



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Learning to Pray
(*Prayer*, pp. 18-25)

Suggested Articles

📖 Lord, Teach Us to Pray
(*Prayer*, pp. 84-88)

📖 Exploring the Forms of Prayer
(*Prayer*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Learning to Pray

The Christ who responds to the plea “Lord, teach us to pray” still helps Christians learn to pray through his body, the Church, in its historical experience of learning the practice of prayer. We have much to learn, then, from the fathers and mothers of the early Church as they learned this practice.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 11:1-13

Meditation¹

Before all things the Teacher of peace and Master of unity is unwilling for prayer to be made single and individually, teaching that he who prays is not to pray for himself alone. For we do not say, “My Father who art in heaven,” nor “Give *me* this day my bread” Prayer with us is public and common; and when we pray we do not pray for one but for the whole people because we the whole people are one.

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (d. 258)

Reflection

Prayer, as communion with God through adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition for oneself, and intercession for others, has been the essential practice of the Christian life in every age. During the “patristic” era – the four centuries after the New Testament – the fathers and mothers of the Church learned much about how to pray. “When the monk replaced the martyr as the ideal embodiment of the Christian life following the end of persecution early in the fourth century, the work of prayer was seen as essential to the monastic vocation,” writes Steve Harmon. “That made prayer essential to the life of every Christian, who was called to deny self and follow Jesus, whether celibate or married, whether withdrawn to the cloister or working in the city. Prayer was so inseparable from all aspects of the life of the Church that a history of the patristic era could easily be written from the standpoint of the history of early Christian prayer.”

We can learn much today by studying these early Christians’ successes, as well as failures, in praying with the aid of the Psalter and written texts in public worship services.

- ▶ *The “collect” drew worshipers into the story of God. “The collectio was a prayer voiced by a leader of worship on behalf of the congregation that had the function of collecting together the prayers of the people,”* Harmon writes. These prayers of adoration and thanksgiving rehearsed the history of God’s actions to invite worshipers “to become participants in God’s story, so that in prayer God’s story and the worshipers’ stories became intertwined.” Collects typically included an address to God, a reference to a divine attribute or saving act, a petition, the purpose for the request, and a conclusion. Here the elements are identified by number: “(1) O God the Trinity, (2) Whose Name is ineffable, Who purifiest the cavern of man’s heart from vices, and makest it whiter than the snow; (3) bestow on us Thy compassions; renew in our inward parts, we pray Thee, Thy Holy Spirit, by Whom we may be able to show forth Thy praise;



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(4) that being strengthened by the righteous and princely Spirit, we may attain a place in the heavenly Jerusalem; (5) through Jesus Christ our Lord.”²

- ▶ *Praying the Lord’s Prayer drew worshipers into “the reign of God as already a present reality but not yet fully realized ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’”* Harmon emphasizes that “the ‘we’ and ‘our’ first-person plural language in both the collect form and the Lord’s Prayer... reminded the worshiper that as a new creation in Christ, she was fundamentally an ecclesial person for whom ‘we’ and ‘our’ took precedence over ‘I’ and ‘my.’”
- ▶ *Singing biblical psalms in Sunday worship and daily services of fixed-hour prayer “supplied words to pray when the mind of the worshiper could not.”* Harmon notes, “Praying the psalms offered a remedy for this paralysis by modeling prayer as utter honesty with God and by portraying God as the sort of God who readily hears honest prayer.” Thus, when they prayed Psalm 139, they learned “it is because God knows everything about us, because God is always with us, and because God is all-powerful in working in our lives that we can be completely honest with God in prayer.... Nothing we can say or think in the context of prayer can shock God – God has heard it all before, and God knows we are thinking it anyway.”

While ancient lectionaries did not censor out from public worship the imprecatory psalms with their passages of brutal candor (e.g., Psalm 137:8-9), most sermons and commentaries muffled their meaning with allegorical interpretations. “The early fathers and mothers of the Church learned imperfectly to pray from the Psalter,” Harmon concludes, “and so do we, to the extent that we shrink back from praying these psalms boldly in their plain sense and fail to emulate their example of honest prayer when we pray in our own words.”

Study Questions

1. What can we learn about praying, in public worship and in private devotion, from the “collect” form of early Christian prayer?
2. In the meditation above, how does Cyprian commend the use of plural pronouns in prayer? What danger do we face when we slip into using “I” and “my” instead?
3. How does Burt Burleson’s hymn “When Gathered Saints in Common Praise” express the worth of communal prayer?
4. In Psalm 139, according to Harmon, how are God’s attributes of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence described in down-to-earth language? What is the value of this?
5. Would you censor any verses in Psalm 139 from public worship today? If so, why? If not, why not?

Departing Hymn: “When Gathered Saints in Common Praise”

1 Cyprian, *St. Cyprian on the Lord’s Prayer*, translated by T. Herbert Bindley (London: SPCK, 1914), 32-33.

2 William Bright, *Ancient Collects and Other Prayers*, seventh edition (Oxford, U.K.: James Parker, 1902), 37.

Learning to Pray

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 4, and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the role of written “collect” prayers in early Christian worship.
2. To consider the value of reading or singing psalms in the Psalter as our prayers.
3. To discuss the importance of communal prayers in reminding us of our identity as members of the Body of Christ.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide.

Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

“A student visiting the Abbey of Gethsemane once asked Thomas Merton (1915-1968) why he had chosen to waste his life by living in a Trappist monastic community,” writes John Essick. “Merton responded politely and profoundly: ‘I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation.’ His gentle response to the student’s question highlights the relevance of prayer in an otherwise busy and bustling world. The utter commitment to the life of prayer apparent in Christians such as Merton suggests not only that prayer matters, but also that it is a practice that must be inculcated through long repetition if it is to become something resembling a vocation” (*Prayer*, p. 84).

If anyone has been an experienced “expert” on early Christian practices of prayer, it was Thomas Merton. His *Contemplative Prayer*, reviewed by Bruce Benson (*Prayer*, pp. 92-93), is a classic. He regularly taught courses on prayer and early Christian monasticism for the novitiates, the “beginner” monks, at Gethsemane. Do you suppose they were surprised to hear him say: “We do not want to be beginners [in regard to prayer]. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything but beginners, all our life!” (*Contemplative Prayer* [New York: Image Books, 1996 (original, 1971)], p. 37).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to teach us and enrich our discipleship through the long witness over the centuries of the Body of Christ, the Church.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 11:1-13 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This discussion relies on Steve Harmon's insight that if the Church truly is Christ's body, then the Christ who responds to the disciples' request "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1) still helps us learn to pray through the historical experience of the Church. Harmon focuses on the development in the "patristic" period of using written prayers – the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, and the "collect" prayers – in public worship and daily fixed-hour prayer times. How were early Christians formed as disciples through these emerging practices of common prayer? They were drawn into the wider story of God's actions in history, reminded of their primary identity as "members one of another" in Christ's body (Romans 12:5; cf. Ephesians 4:25), and given words to approach God honestly when their own words and thoughts failed them.

Study Questions

1. Collect prayers connect us to both God's story and one another. They incorporate our praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession into the wider context of God's actions through the history of Israel and the Church. They allow us to weigh our immediate concerns and desires in light of God's kingdom over time and in many cultures. These prayers also connect us to one another in a worshiping congregation, precisely because they "collect" our individual prayers and offer them to God in one voice on behalf of the body of Christ. Encourage members to discuss the value of each part of the collect prayer in the study guide. How could they use this outline to enrich their own prayers offered to God in public worship and in private devotion?
2. As disciples, we are now "members one of another" in the body of Christ. How we perceive, care for, and act in the world is being reshaped by this new identity. This does not mean that we know everything about the physical needs, spiritual failings, and secret hopes of everyone in the congregation, but it does suggest that when it becomes appropriate for us to know these things, we would lift them before God as our own.
3. The first verse of "When Gathered Saints in Common Praise" notes how, through prayers of praise and petition, the individual becomes open to wider and shared concerns – "the closed and burdened soul is freed / by prayer transcending lesser need." The second verse mentions the healing power of intercessory prayers – "a kindness sent in Jesus' name / is prayer that's shared to heal the pain." The worshiping community is described in verse three as a place of "abiding grace" when we confess our "broken ways." Encourage members to share how their praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession to God were transformed on occasions when they prayed with "gathered saints in common praise."
4. Harmon quips that these big words to describe God – omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence – are "the shared *foreign language* of theologians, divinity students, and ministers." Divide members into three groups to collect the psalmist's concrete images for God's omniscience, or knowledge of everything (139:1-6), omnipresence, or presence everywhere (139:7-12), and omnipotence, ability to do all things (139:13-18). Reflecting on these and similar images are a form of adoration of God, and they may suggest words we can use to praise God's greatness through prayer.
"These truths about God's nature have the potential to motivate Christians toward utter honesty with God in two ways," Harmon notes. "First, knowing that God knows us completely should keep us from playing charades with God. God knows what is going on in our lives, so it is pointless to be anything but completely honest with God. Second, knowing that God knows us completely should give us the courage to speak our mind with God."
5. The unvarnished anger in verses Psalm 139:19-22 usually are censored. The Roman Catholic *Lectionary for Mass* does not use the psalm; the *Book of Common Prayer* uses 139:1-17 once during Epiphany; the *Revised Common Lectionary* uses selections (139:1-6, 13-18; and 139:1-12, 23-24) in Epiphany and Ordinary Time. Harmon makes a case for using the entire psalm to commend honesty before God and explain its transforming power. However, would some members and visitors misunderstand the psalm as commending the anger itself?

Departing Hymn

"When Gathered Saints in Common Praise" can be found on pp. 51-53 of *Prayer*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.