

What Is Prayer?

Ever wondered what prayer is, isn't, and how to do it? Read on!

Whenever we talk about prayer, three questions tend to pop into our heads.

1. “Why should I pray? After all, doesn't God already know what I want and need, that I'm thankful or sorry? I don't need to change God's mind!”



In one sense, you're absolutely right: before a word springs to your lips, God knows it through and through (Psalm 139:4). God doesn't want to haggle with you, because prayer is not about changing God's mind. It is about giving God what God wants: your heart. The only way to do this is to pray.

Think about it this way... as a married person, I'm often tempted by this thought: “My spouse knows what I want. Becca knows that I'm sorry. Becca knows I appreciate her. She knows I love her. I don't need to say these things.” Becca may know these things, but what she wants (and what all spouses want) is the heart, and guess what? Words and deeds are the currency of the heart. Sharing what we want, acknowledging our mistakes, showing our appreciation, saying I love you: these maintain that living relationship with others which give us life.

The same is true in prayer: the Lord does not need our words to convince Him. (In fact, St. Thomas Aquinas says God wants to give us things through our prayers, so God puts desires for these things in our hearts.) What the Lord thirsts for is our heart. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, we share our words and ourselves with Him so that He can have our hearts and let His living water well up in us to eternal life (John 4:14).

2. “What is prayer?” Most of us think prayer is the same as “saying our prayers,” and there is much truth in that. But the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines prayer at a deeper level: it is our “vital and personal relationship with the living and true God” (CCC 2558). Prayer is, in the words of the early Church Fathers, “keeping company with God.”

Keeping company with God is not significantly different than keeping company with our friends. This happens in many ways: texting, phone calls, hanging out at the bar or the coffee shop, reading something together and talking, just being in the presence of one another. God calls us to relationship in all these same ways: He wants us to tell Him our random thoughts. He wants us to talk with Him as we are. He wants to hang out with us, to speak to us through Scripture, just to be with us. Prayer is letting God be a real part of our lives, Someone we make time for, Someone we share our days and ourselves with.

3. “How do I pray? I don’t know how!” (*Especially now that I’m quarantined with crazy kids, no shortage of work, and no end in sight?!*)

If you don’t feel like you know how to pray, don’t worry: ask God. Prayer is God’s gift, not something that we “get good at.” Prayer is entering into God’s language so that we can hear the Word of God (Jesus Christ) and respond to the Father with God’s breath (the Holy Spirit). It involves letting God teach us: “the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (Romans 8:26). No matter how often we pray, we must always repeat that request of Jesus’s disciples: “Lord, teach us to pray!” (Luke 11:1)