

## *How to Pray: Doubters' Edition*

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July 14, 2019

I can still remember when I started to have a bunch of questions about prayer. I was about 8 years old, when I decided I would run an experiment. I would pray very hard every day for a week for a Hot Wheels car that I particularly wanted. I wouldn't tell anyone about these prayers – I was a big fan of a double blind study back then, even – and if the hearts of my parents were miraculously opened for this Hot Wheels car, or I found it just laying there on the sidewalk, I'd know that this whole prayer thing worked. But it seemed fishy to me – you just ask God for stuff and just hope that it works out? Everyone at church seemed to be pretty into this prayer thing, but only some folks are talking about how it worked for them, and others are announcing bad things in church that happened to their families. Did they not just pray protective prayers enough? Seems like a pretty big misstep. And so I did my experiment and did not get a Hot Wheels car, so that soured me on the whole thing pretty much immediately. I then developed my favorite hobby during prayer which was keeping my eyes open and tattling on folks who kept their eyes open during prayer. This seemed to at least have the benefit of being fun and verifiable.

But I can't shake that prayer is so often treated just as I described – or worse, that none of us really know what to do with prayer and so we either don't do it, or we say we do it but don't really, or we talk about efficacy of prayer but don't really believe that. Or maybe we do? It's a tough thing. I've had a lot of conversations with folks who are trying to work through how prayer works and whether there is a being who responds to prayers, or what? And what about praying for miracles or things that go against how we know science works – isn't that just superstition and ritual? A holdover from when we hunted mammoths and life was more precarious than it is now?

I want to offer a few tips about how you might be able to approach prayer in some new ways, that if you're struggling, some new avenues for re-engaging with prayer might open up.

The first suggestion is to change how you think about the Divine. Meister Eckhart said that the size of your lens is the size of your God – so, if we only ever see God through a lens as a police officer punishing wicked deeds and Santa Claus rewarding good boys and girls, then we will only ever experience God as policeman and Santa Claus – a very impoverished view of God. But if we start to think about God as creativity itself, that gave birth to and sustains even now life itself, then we can begin to imagine prayer not as a petition to a sky-being who is ready to punish or reward, but as joining our energy and attention to that same “ground of being” as Tillich called it. We link our lives and our selves to that grounding energy, letting ourselves feel and connect to the center of all things.

The second suggestion is to not use words, or think about prayer as more than a conversation or a list of questions. So, our verse from Thessalonians tells us a very perplexing thing – pray without ceasing. How the heck are we supposed to do that? You think you have a busy life now? Try adding prayer in every second of that calendar. And that’s just the question, how does this work? That someone asked in the spiritual classic from Russian Orthodoxy – *The Way of the Pilgrim*. Someone is in church one day, a very pious guy, and he hears this verse, and he seeks after how you can live a life of prayer without ceasing. It turns out the answer is that you have to live your life in accordance with your values, in connection with God and that is a form of prayer. You see, no words at all. And Confucius gives us the same answer in *The Analects* – Confucius is famously ambivalent about prayer, and definitely doesn’t have a concept for the Abrahamic God that is influenceable, but emphatically endorses rituals, called *Li* in the analects, and so when his follower asks to pray for him, he rightly asks whether such a thing exists. His disciple cites a traditional text about the upper and lower heaven, and Confucius as someone who practices harmony of life responds that he has already been praying for a long time then. That is that the whole of his life, the seeking of harmony, and the living of a life in fulfillment of that has amounted to a life of prayer.

Another source we might add is Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish minds. Upon returning from Selma to march with Martin Luther King, he was asked if he had much time for prayer in Selma – his famous response was, “I prayed with my legs,” that protest and reaching out for justice were the highest form of prayer.

All of these taken together – Paul’s insistence on praying without ceasing, Confucius’s insistence that a life lived in concordance with Tian or Heaven is prayer, and Abraham Joshua Heschel’s idea of praying with your feet make me think that there is something to a life lived in accordance with your values that amounts to prayer. That when we reach out in love and truth and mercy, when we fight for justice, we are at prayer.

So, prayer is tricky, but it can fundamentally reshape us if we change how we are approaching the Divine or thinking about our lives. Sometimes that looks like prayer in a prayer book or that I say aloud on Sunday service, other times that looks like a life lived in accordance with our values. The point here is that prayer is not just one thing. If you’re looking to save prayer, while your idea about God is changing, this might be a pathway to rethinking how prayer works. Does it mean that there’s a personal God that is intervening on your behalf? Only you can answer if that’s a model of God that works for you in the here and now. Some folks have experience of God talking to them or healing them – perhaps traditional prayer works for you. That’s ok too.

My final word of advice for would-be prayers who are connecting up to the center of all things? Shut up. Be quiet. God doesn’t shout. If your mind is clouded, if you are anxious or ill at ease, it may be hard to hear God.

It may be that our faith changes so that prayer becomes something that doesn't make sense in a traditional way – if so, I would say live a life in accordance with your values. That's how you pray without ceasing; that's how you give an answer like Confucius – I have already been praying a long time.

I also welcome conversation about your prayer lives. Just in case you're not aware, I am the one person in your life who is definitely here for a conversation about prayer and your prayer life and who has resources that definitely didn't make it into this sermon. So, come and see me, and who knows, you might just start a new love affair with prayer that you could have never seen coming.