

LESSON 3

JESUS TEACHES US HOW TO PRAY

BACKGROUND READING



Jesus teaches us how to pray. When we read the Gospels, we can examine how Jesus prayed, and therefore learn how to imitate Him. But not only that, Jesus Himself passed on to us three keys to prayer that are necessary for the life of prayer.

How Did Jesus Pray?

Jesus must first have learned to pray from His mother, Mary, and His foster father, Joseph. Mary and Joseph first taught Him the words He must use, and He would watch them at their prayers. How beautiful that Jesus learned how to pray from His human parents, and what dignity that gives to us, the first teachers of prayers to our children!

But at the age of 12—after Mary and Joseph found Him in the Temple after He had gone missing for three days—Jesus revealed to them, and to us, that there is “an otherwise secret source” of His prayer (CCC 2599). Jesus says to His parents, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). The secret source of Jesus’ prayer is His intimate relationship with His Father in Heaven.

When we read about Jesus’ life, we see that He “prays before the decisive moments

of his mission” (CCC 2600). Jesus prayed at the beginning of His ministry and the Father called Jesus “His beloved Son” at Jesus’ baptism; Jesus spent 40 days in the desert fasting and praying before He began His preaching, teaching, and healing; and He prayed at His Transfiguration, when the Father revealed to Peter, John, and James the Sonship of Jesus to His Father. As we examine how Jesus prayed, we see that He went to His Father for strength and direction in all the key events of His life. Even though He was the only Son of God, Jesus prayed so that He might teach us how to pray. Thus, “by contemplating and hearing the Son, the master of prayer, the children learn to pray to the Father” (CCC 2601).

When Jesus prayed to His Father, He began with thanksgiving and an acknowledgment that His Father heard Him. He taught us that God always hears our prayers, and that we should thank God before the prayer is even answered. Our love for God and our trust in Him is a greater treasure than the answered prayer.

He showed us also that the life of prayer calls for three keys to prayer: 1) conversion, 2) faith, and 3) watchfulness.

Conversion

The first key to prayer is conversion of heart. As the *Catechism* states, “From the *Sermon on the Mount* onwards, Jesus insists on conversion of heart” (CCC 2608). Conversion is a *change of heart*. The Greek word *metanoia* is often used to describe conversion. The word *metanoia* implies a complete change of heart that is expressed by a “turning around,” or a change in direction, almost as if a person walking down a road suddenly makes an about-face and goes in an entirely different direction. Conversion is a changing of one’s heart, mind, and actions as a result of encountering God’s grace.

We should remember, however, that someone can have the right words and even perform the right actions, but not have a heart that has experienced conversion. Jesus spoke to the Pharisees about this very issue: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and every kind of filth. Even so, on the outside you appear righteous, but inside you are filled with hypocrisy and evildoing” (Matthew 23:27–28). Jesus was telling the Pharisees that their actions appeared to be good, but inside their hearts were evil. A true conversion of heart brings with it a change in our actions. In the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, a Catholic commentary on Sacred Scripture, we read, “conversion is conceived as genuine interior change of attitude that issues in a revolution in personal conduct” (JBC, 77:134). What defines conversion, as well as what matters most fundamentally in prayer, is the state of our hearts. If we hear God’s call, and respond in humility, then He will give us the grace of conversion of heart.

Faith

The second key to prayer is faith. The *Catechism* says, “Once committed to conversion, the heart learns to pray in *faith*” (CCC 2609). But what is faith? The Scripture says, “Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Through the grace of God we can hope for and believe in all things that God has revealed to us, even though we cannot see, or sometimes even understand them. This kind of faith is a gift from God and is readily available to all who truly desire it. This was the faith of Abraham, which we studied last month—not seeing, not understanding, and yet believing.

When we pray in faith we must always remember to pray in accordance with the Father’s will: “Jesus calls his disciples to bring into their prayer this concern for cooperating with the divine plan” (CCC 2611). We are assured that God will answer those prayers that are in accord with His perfect will.

Watchfulness

Being watchful is the third key to prayer: “Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:33). Jesus calls us to be a watchful people. As people of prayer we are to be attentive to God, who is among us, and be alert for His coming again. We must live every moment of our lives as if God were to come again in glory today, to judge the living and the dead.

We must not only pray to be ready when Jesus comes again, but we must also pray so to live the holy life that God has called us all to live. Because of our tendency toward sin, choosing the good is not always easy. In fact, sometimes it is very difficult. We have

only to look within our own hearts to see the struggle within ourselves. Jesus urges us to pray for the strength to overcome temptation: “Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Luke 22:46). Each and every day we must ask for the grace of God in order to

battle against the evil temptations that are before us, and in order to do the good that we have been called to do. If we practice these three keys to prayer then we are well on our way to developing an intimate relationship with our Father in Heaven.