

Saint James as a school for prayer

Knowing an Unknowable God in Forum Series 2021-22

When the disciples approached Jesus they asked, “Lord, teach us to pray.” He replied, when you pray say, “Our Father in heaven, holy is your name...”

There are many ways to pray and many kinds of prayer. Saint John of Damascus said, “Prayer is lifting of the mind and the heart to God, seeking those good things that come from God.” Classically there are four components of prayer: Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving and Supplication. These four however are so dense and compact that it helps to separate them out a bit to see how we do them and incorporate them in our daily life and our church life.

Seven elements of prayer

1. **Praise**—focusses on the nature and character of who God is.
2. **Thanksgiving**—giving thanks for the fact and the experiences we have that God is God: the Creator of the natural world and all its wonders. That we are miraculously sustained in a universe that is billions of years old and billions of galaxies large. That we have food, clothing and shelter, love and friendship, a church community, etc.
3. **Confession**—where we have gone astray or need strengthening. Confessing our dependence upon God: how much we need God to help us to seek and stay in God’s presence with gratitude and praise in our hearts. We can’t confess unless we are contrite, sorry for what we have done. And being sorry means seeking to make amends. It is no good saying to God how sorry I am for hurting a friend unless wherever possible Theo knows I am sorry too. Her forgiveness of me will depend upon her capacity for mercy and my capacity for change. (Fortunately God’s forgiveness and mercy is assured if I am truly penitent whether Theo forgives me or not. God is all-Merciful while humans struggle to be even partially merciful.)
4. **Intercession**—loving prayer for others and loving or merciful orientation towards others. Intercessory prayer Jesus teaches us is disinterested love that includes seeking to love our enemies and our neighbors as ourselves. Not to just be like the Pharisees who love those who are like them only.
5. **Supplication**—seeking what we need for ourselves. Not blandly praying, “make me a better person, Lord”; but seriously seeking help with specifics: feeling less rage and anger; or less bitterness; experiencing more gratitude; more freedom from jealousy, or liberation from addictive behaviors; whether food, sex or alcohol or people pleasing. Asking for help and thus opening the way to humility and the next form of prayer.
6. **Submission**—practicing the daily laying aside of myself, my will and my desires. Allowing God to sit in the driver’s seat, as they say in 12 step meetings.
7. **Listening**—Seeking through prayer and meditation to increase our conscious contact with God. Practicing the presence of God. “Being at one with the Holy One.”