

**Christian Contemplative Prayer**  
**(The “cliff notes” version for the busy college student)**  
by The Rev. James D Franklin III

*“Serene Light, shining in the ground of my being,  
Draw me to yourself,  
Draw me past the snares of the senses,  
Out of the mazes of the mind,  
Free me from symbols, from words,  
That I may discover  
The Word Unspoken  
In the darkness  
That veils the ground of my being. Amen”  
~Ancient Byzantine Prayer*

Christian Contemplative prayer FAQ’s

**What it is not:**

- “New Age-y” or woo woo. Mindfulness and eastern meditation are great for you, however without intention toward the Trinity, they may become self centered at best, or reflect a Deistic, laissez faire God at worst.
- Gnostic. Nor does it have anything to do with gnosis: a spark/divine within you and at odds with sinful/evil self or creation. Instead you are tapping into your divine “very goodness at the center of your being.
- Dualistic. Bad and good/light and dark are thin descriptions and bad theologies. The lines of so-called “secular” and “sacred” are blurred and the goal of divine union is to see all as God sees: everyone in their created, belovedness.
- Calvinist. The idea there is something irreducibly wrong with people would be counter productive.
- Therapy. It can reduce stress and it can help but it cannot replace professional talk-therapy. However, studies show that it is not *more* effective at curing depression and anxiety than medication.

**What are the benefits?**

What’s in it for me? Positive side effects include:

- Discernment - listening to where God might be calling you to use your God-given gifts.
- Being more “woke” - moving to levels of deeper awareness - to yourself and surroundings;
- Better blood pressure!
- Stress reduction/Less Anxiety (learning to respond instead of react)
- Curb addicting behaviors and misplaced desires
- Help fight insomnia

**I’m Skeptical.**

Good! So am I. We’re not really sure how any of this works!! (Otherwise contemplation wouldn’t be a part of mysticism!) The truth is: Neuroscience still catching up. It can’t explain the mystery or “why”.

**A word of caution**

For folks with significant trauma, it could have a disassociative effect and cause deeper depression and anxiety.

Really, it’s about **Relationship**. If prayer is, as we commonly think about it, just “talking to God” then contemplative prayer is “*listening* to God.” Relationships aren’t really relationships if all the conversation is one sided. But God doesn’t speak to us like in the OT. So how do we listen back?

## 2 Types of prayer

1. Cataphatic - from us to God. — Martha-like prayers. Getting our house in order. Engages our faculties like feelings, reason, memory, imagination, will.  
Ex. Intercessory prayer, Forgiveness/repentance, Anne Lamott: "Help, Thanks, Wow"
2. Apophatic — formless, emptying, listening, silence (element of "wow", awe, wonder). There is a Mary of Bethany-like prayer, Sitting at the feet of Jesus. Examples:
  - Jesus Prayer - Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me.
  - Lectio Divina - reading scripture 3 times with silence and listening
  - Christian Meditation - single return word or short phrase (ex. "Abba" or "Yahweh") -
  - Agape prayer - "I love you, father. I love you, son."

\*The rhythm of the Daily Office (Morning, Noonday, and Evening Prayer) and other liturgies can (and should!) contain elements of both types of prayers.

## Is this biblical?

Read this brief selection and decide for yourself if there is scriptural basis for contemplative prayer:

- **1 Kings 19:11-12** - "He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence."
- **1 Chronicles 16:11** - "Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his presence continually."
- **2 Chronicles 7:14** - "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."
- **Psalms 1:1-3** "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper."
- **Psalms 4:4** - "When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent."
- **Psalms 24:6** - "Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob."
- **Psalms 27:8** - "'Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek."
- **Psalms 46:10** - "Be still, and know that I am God!"
- **Psalms 130** - "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord. More than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning."
- **Psalms 131** - "O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me."
- **Hosea 5:15** - "I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will beg my favor"
- **Jeremiah 30:21** - "Their prince shall be one of their own, their ruler shall come from their midst; I will bring him near, and he shall approach me, for who would otherwise dare to approach me says the Lord. And you shall be my people, and I will be your God."
- **Jeremiah 31:33-34** - "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."
- **Mt. 7:7-8** - "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."
- **Mark 1:35** - "In the morning, while it was still very dark, (Jesus) got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."
- **Mark 6:31** - "He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.'"

- **Luke 17:20-21** - “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”
- **John 6:15** - “...he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”
- **John 5:37-42** - “And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you.”
- **John 15:7-9** - “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”
- **John 17:21** - “...that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”
- **Acts 17:26-28** - “From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’”
- **Hebrews 4:9-10** - “So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest...”
- **Romans 8:26-27** - “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”
- **Romans 12:1-2** - “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”
- **Galatians 2:20** - “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”
- **Colossians 3:1-3** - “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”
- **Ephesians 1:17-18** - “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints...”
- **Ephesians 3:16-19** - “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” <— Teacher, episcopal priest, and modern day mystic, Cynthia Bourgeault says Ephesians 3 is the “GOAL of contemplative prayer.”

### **3 Levels: The Concentric Circles of Awakening:**

Ordinary Awareness —> Spiritual Awareness —> Divine Awareness (Bourgeault)

or “Natural, Spiritual and Divine” (according to Evelyn Underhill) the goal is transformation, to “know thyself”, and embrace God in love.

1. Ordinary awareness: Secular meditation, breathing exercises, etc are fine for self awakening, awareness to your surroundings, and body awareness. But rarely will it move the person to spiritual awareness (at least, not the intent but who’s to say the Spirit won’t move where it will!) The

mind, peppered with memory, reflexive thinking, and “monkey mind” — it’s marked by “I” statements and egoic thinking (not nec. a bad thing!)

2. **Spiritual Awareness:** marked by “mystical experiences” or inexplicable moments of being swept up by a sunset or music or eucharist. CB argues this can be a way of being and not just experiences. But where ordinary awareness splits the world into subject and object, spiritual awareness perceives an innate sense of belonging.
3. **Divine Awareness:** we are not God. But if we are “hidden with Christ in God”, then there exists at our innermost being, a divine indwelling. (Abide in me and I in you.) If we’re created in the image of God then our divine awareness is as Thomas Keating calls, “our personal big bang.” This is the source of our being and if Christ is the source of life, then our true self and our identity is Jesus Christ at our center.

### **Helpful Terminology/Theology**

Trinitarian - active participation in the life and dance of the Trinity (aka, “Perichoresis”)

All loving - grace-filled (being able to claim that God loves all and that I am beloved)

Sabbath oriented - rest, ordered contrary to the rhythm of the world

Dying to self (“those who lose their life will find it”) greater awareness to the divine is a movement from “I” to “Thou” (from ego to wholeness)

Kenosis or the “self-emptying” of God is an invitation to embrace suffering and embrace reality as God did in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Phil. 2: “Let what was seen in Christ Jesus be seen in you”

Theosis - becoming *like* God, over time. Being more loving, compassionate, Christ centered, becoming less judgmental, and non-dualistic.

Letting go of what you think you know

Beginner’s mind - approach everything with wonder and curiosity like a child. Put another way: “a naked intent direct to God” ~*the Cloud of Unknowing*

The 4 R’s: “Resist no thought, Retain no thought, React to no thought, Return to the sacred word.”

### **Quotes from Mystics and Contemplative Christians:**

Cynthia Bourgeault: “You do not die on a cross in order to set-up resurrection; you die on a cross because the willingness to give it all away is itself the original and ultimate creative act from which all being flows.” ~*Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (2004)

St. Augustine: “God is closer to your soul than you are yourself.”

Evelyn Underhill: “But you, practical [human], have lived all your days amongst the illusions of multiplicity. ...your attention to life has been deliberately adjusted to a world of frittered values and prismatic refracted lights: full of incompatible interests, people, principles, things. Your poor worried consciousness flies to and fro amongst them; it has become a restless and complicated thing. At this very moment your thoughts are buzzing like a swarm of bees. The reduction of this fevered complex to a unity appears to be a task beyond all human power. Yet the situation is not as hopeless for you as it seems. All this is only on the periphery of the mind, where it touches and reacts to the world of appearance. At the centre there is a stillness which even you are not able to break. There, the rhythm of your duration is one with the rhythm of the universal life. There, your essential self exists: the permanent being which persists through and behind the flow and change of your conscious states. You have been snatched to that centre once or twice. Turn your consciousness inward to it deliberately. Retreat to that point whence all the various lines of your activities flow, and to which at last they must return.”

~*Practical Mysticism* p.19-20.

St. John of the Cross: “Silence is God’s first language.”

Thomas Keating: A monk walks up to Fr. Keating and says: “Father, I’m such a failure at this prayer... often times I have ten thousand bad thoughts in a single sitting practice.” Not missing a beat, Fr. Keating replies: “O How lovely! Ten thousand opportunities to return to God!”

Keating: "The ordinary events of daily life become our practice. I can't emphasize that too much. A monastic structure is not the path to holiness for lay folks. The routine of daily life is. Contemplative prayer is aimed at transforming daily life with its never-ending round of ordinary activities." ~*Open Mind, Open Heart*

William Meninger: "Do not think you are wasting your time because you are not involved in mental calculations. Do not think that you are being idle because you are resting in loving contemplation of God. It is at these times that you are being most faithful to what you are and what you are called to be: a lover in union with the beloved." ~*The loving search for God*

Thomas Merton: "We thank Him less by words than by the serene happiness of silent acceptance. It is our emptiness in the presence of His reality, our silence in the presence of His infinitely rich silence, our joy in the bosom of the serene darkness in which His light holds us absorbed, it is all this that praises Him." ~*New Seeds of Contemplation*

Merton: "This act of total surrender is not merely a fantastic intellectual and mystical gamble; it is something much more serious. It is an act of love for this unseen person, who, in the very gift of love by which we surrender ourselves to his reality also makes his presence known to his." ~*Contemplation in a world of action* p299

"Prayer is God, who worketh all things in [humankind]."  
~St. Gregory of Sinai

"What we plant in the soil of contemplation, we reap in the harvest of action."  
~Meister Eckhart

## Practices!!!

### **Methods**

- A. "Sacred Word" to return to with each breath: ex. Jesus, God, Abba, Spirit, love, mercy, grace, come lord, let go
- B. "Sacred Phrase" to return to with each breath: ex. "Be still...and know...that I...am God"
- C. The Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ...Son of God...Have mercy on me" (see attached)
- D. The Agape Prayer: "I love you son/daughter - I love you father/mother"
- E. The Examen (see attached)
- F. The Kyrie: Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy
- G. Daily Office (with longer/more pronounced silences)
- H. Lectio Divina: sitting with a text/scripture (see attached)
- I. The Welcoming Prayer: welcoming each thought, acknowledging it, and letting go. (see attached)
- J. Yoga: but with a sacred word!
- K. Prayer Walking: take an intentional walk (slower than normal) you're not trying to "get somewhere" thanking God/having gratitude for all that you see.

### **Baby Step (15 minutes, once a week)**

**Step 1: Find a place.** It doesn't have to be "quiet" - just quiet enough. Rocking chair, bed (but don't lay down), chair in your dorm room, lounge or library. On a rock or bench in Reynolda gardens. Be relaxed but engaged/alert. Place your feet on the ground or "crisscross applesauce" and hands comfortable (not fidgety) folded in your lap or on your knees.

**Step 2: Pick a method** from the above selection.

**Step 3: Set your phone to DND!! And set a timer for 15 minutes** on your phone or watch and set aside!

**Step 4: Letting go.** Close your eyes and "Place sticks in the hamster wheel" of your mind. The 4 R's are helpful here: "Resist no thought, Retain no thought, React to no thought, Return to the sacred word." Exercising your surrender muscle! You may choose to time your word as naturally as possible with your breath and breathing.

**Step 5: Amen.** At the end of your time, say the Lord's Prayer or simply an "Amen."

### **Advanced Practice**

Repeat the above with the same method or different methods for 20-30 minutes, 1-2 times/week.

#### Additional Resources:

- Contemplative Outreach - <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>
- *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* by Cynthia Bourgeault (2004)
- *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Thomas Keating
- *Practical Mysticism* by Evelyn Underhill
- *New Seeds of Contemplation* by Thomas Merton
- *From Whom God Hid Nothing* by Meister Eckhart
- *The Cloud of Unknowing* (anonymous)
- *The Loving Search For God* by William Meninger
- The Center for Action and Contemplation: [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org)

## “The Examen”

**1. Become aware of God’s presence.** Look back on the events of the day in the company of the Holy Spirit. The day may seem confusing to you—a blur, a jumble, a muddle. Ask God to bring clarity and understanding.

**2. Review the day with gratitude.** Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God. Walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights. Focus on the day’s gifts. Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with. What did you receive from these people? What did you give them? Pay attention to small things—the food you ate, the sights you saw, and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details.

**3. Pay attention to your emotions.** One of St. Ignatius’s great insights was that we detect the presence of the Spirit of God in the movements of our emotions. Reflect on the feelings you experienced during the day. Boredom? Elation? Resentment? Compassion? Anger? Confidence? What is God saying through these feelings? God will most likely show you some ways that you fell short. Make note of these sins and faults. But look deeply for other implications. Does a feeling of frustration perhaps mean that God wants you consider a new direction in some area of your work? Are you concerned about a friend? Perhaps you should reach out to her in some way.

**4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.** Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. It may involve a feeling—positive or negative. It may be a significant encounter with another person or a vivid moment of pleasure or peace. Or it may be something that seems rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart—whether intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

**5. Look toward tomorrow.** Ask God to give you light for tomorrow’s challenges. Pay attention to the feelings that surface as you survey what’s coming up. Are you doubtful? Cheerful? Apprehensive? Full of delighted anticipation? Allow these feelings to turn into prayer. Seek God’s guidance. Ask him for help and understanding. Pray for hope.

St. Ignatius encouraged people to talk to Jesus like a friend. End the Daily Examen with a conversation with Jesus. Ask forgiveness for your sins. Ask for his protection and help. Ask for his wisdom about the questions you have and the problems you face. Do all this in the spirit of gratitude. Your life is a gift, and it is adorned with gifts from God.

## Practice: The Jesus Prayer

I invite you into a contemplative practice with the familiar Eastern Orthodox prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner.” Let’s look closely at some of the words:

*Lord:* While “lord” can connote dominion and hierarchical authority (the Greek, *kurios*, means “master”), remember the authority with which Jesus taught was an inner authority, born of his awareness that he was God’s own child. And we have inherited this power!

*Jesus Christ:* Jesus is both human and divine, personal and infinite. “Jesus” was a common name (Joshua in Hebrew); “Christ” means anointed, chosen. We need both to ground us in the ordinary, suffering world and to draw us toward the “heaven” of union.

*Sinner:* “Sin” is simply that which keeps us from knowing and living out of our True Self. We are forgetful of our inherent belovedness. Don’t think of sin as just individual “nastiness,” which is largely shame-based thinking and in itself does not get you to a good place. Understand this in the context of mystical union rather than moralism.

*Mercy:* We need the “salvation” of Love to overcome our fear-based disconnection, to return us to wholeness. Abundant, never withheld, restorative grace brings us back into intimacy with self, God, and others. Pope Francis says that mercy is the highest virtue in the hierarchy of Christian truths.

Using this prayer as a focal point, say the words repeatedly until the prayer moves from your head into your heart and you connect with the Presence already praying ceaselessly within.

**“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**



# The Welcoming Prayer Method

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

*~Philippians 4:6*

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**There are three movements of the 15 min. prayer:**

**1.) What you are experiencing** this moment in your body?

Find a comfortable position, offer up a brief prayer of intention, confession, or intercession for yourself or someone else.

**2.) “Welcome”** what you are experiencing this moment in your body as an opportunity to consent to the Divine Indwelling.

In the silence as thoughts come into your mind, welcome them, especially feelings or emotions by saying, “Welcome \_\_\_\_\_” (anger, anxiety, etc.)

**3.) Let go** by saying “I let go of my desire for security, affection, control and embrace this moment as it is.” Time your exhaling with the letting go – as though you are expelling the desire or emotion and giving it over to God.

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“Welcoming Prayer is the practice that actively lets go of thoughts and feelings that support the false-self system. It embraces painful emotions experienced in the body rather than avoiding them or trying to suppress them. It does not embrace the suffering as such but the presence of the Holy Spirit in the particular pain, whether physical, emotional, or mental. Thus, it is the full acceptance of the content of the present moment. [In] giving the experience over to the Holy Spirit, the false-self system is gradually undermined and the true self liberated.”

~FATHER THOMAS KEATING

## Guidelines for Lectio Divina

**Step One:** Read the passage, encouraging everyone to listen with the "ear of their heart." What phrase, sentence or even one word stands out to you?

**Step Two:** Read the passage again and **Reflect** on the word of God. Encourage everyone to be aware of what touches them, a thought or reflection that is meaningful. Allow a minute or two of silence.

**Step Three:** Read the passage again and **Respond** spontaneously to the word of God. Be aware of any prayer that rises up within that expresses the experience. Allow a minute or two of silence.

**Step Four:** Read the passage a final time and **Rest** in the word, reflect or pray and allow God to speak in the silence. Allow three or four minutes of silence.

**To Extend the Practice:** After the resting, take the phrase, sentence, or word into your daily activity and listen to it, reflect on it, pray over it, and rest in it as time allows during the day. Allow it to become part of you.