

"Teach Us, Neuroscience, to Pray"
Matthew 6:1-08

Prayer has been in the news lately with the debate over prayer in school, when in June the Supreme Court sided with a football coach to allow him to pray at the 50-yard line after his team's games. This was seen as a great victory for prayer in school. What is interesting is that prayer has been used as a political weapon throughout history. One example comes from Italy during the rule of Mussolini. In his book *The Pope and Mussolini*, David Kertzer shows how Mussolini gained the support of the Roman Catholic Church through giving them more influence in public life. He ordered his cabinet to pray at the altar of the Unknown Soldier. He required placing crucifixes in courts, hospitals, and classrooms. He even made it a crime to insult a priest. Even when we go back to the time of Jesus, we see similar issues with prayer and piety where people used public prayers to show piety. Even for those of us who don't try to flaunt our piety, prayer is misunderstood when we think of it as getting God to give us the things we want or need. It is as if God is the great vending machine in the sky. One of the many problems with this is when our "prayers" are not answered, we end up feeling abandoned by God or lacking in faith. Sometimes people feel that prayer is about using fancy language and words and thus when asked to pray in a group, they feel nervous and underprepared.

So today we turn to Jesus and neuroscience to help us dig deeper into prayer. Science can help us get deeper into our prayer as it shows us that contemplative prayer has a definite positive effect on us. Meditative prayer where one learns to surrender to God in prayer instead of asserting one's will and desires can be very transformative. According to science cited by Mike McHargue in his book *Finding God in the Waves*, studies show that people who meditate have, "increased activity in the frontal lobe, which is responsible for attention and focus...[and] experience reduced activity in the parietal lobe of the cerebral cortex...the part of our brain that keeps track of our immediate surroundings and sense of physical presence...religious people with consistent prayer practice basically shut down their parietal lobe during prayer. This reduced activity can create the sensation that one is leaving this reality and connecting with something greater and less physical...prayer and meditation are so similar in the brain...research shows that meditation is one of the best things you can do for your brain –right up there with reading and physical exercise. Neuroscientists have found that people who pray regularly have thicker gray matter in their prefrontal cortex (that's your brain's CEO, responsible for focus and willpower) and their anterior cingulate cortex (the part of your brain responsible for compassion and empathy)...This also reduces the responsiveness of the amygdala (the part of the brain responsible for fear and anger)...Meditation lowers your blood pressure and helps you feel less stressed." People who practice contemplative prayer know the difference in themselves and know how their prayer life leads them away from demanding things from God to seeing God being with them in all of life's circumstances. Yet, meditation takes practice and persistence. It takes at least six weeks of consistent practice for our brains to develop the God networks. So when people ask, does prayer make a difference, I say, "absolutely, because it lowers our resistance to the divine and it opens us to God in real and lasting ways."

Jesus knew these truths from a spiritual perspective. He knew about the temptations of people who use prayer to get what they want, whether from society or from God. In order to appreciate what Jesus was trying to say, we have to remember the practice of patronage or beneficence in the ancient Roman and Jewish worlds. A great resource about this is the work of Bruce Winter in his book *Seek the Welfare of the City*. At the time of Jesus, public works, public buildings, public baths, city festivals, feasts, and games were done by wealthy individuals. So the people of the ancient cities would praise the benefactors in public with great praise that would show their appreciation. Even the emperor of the Roman Empire was part of this practice, giving of his own wealth in order to show off his power and generosity. Benefactors also supported individuals by providing them income and goods. In return, it was the duty of the recipient of such generosity to praise his benefactor in public writing poems or essays about his generosity or even waking him up in the morning to a hymn of praise. A second level of individual benefaction was the support of widows. A third level of benefaction was the support of beggars and the homeless. All these levels required public praise and recognition.

Against this backdrop, we can appreciate what Jesus was saying to the people. Jesus was trying to say that God is not our heavenly benefactor who needs praise and adoration in order to bestow favors. The human systems of power and esteem have no place in the Kingdom of God. God was the opposite of that kind of system. Prayer was to be about a transformative relationship with God that turns our world of fear and anger upside down and eventually heals us from our fears. In the Kingdom of God, Jesus proclaimed a different vision where doing God's work in the world is the motivation without the rewards that appeal to our egos and social systems that oppress and abuse the needy.

The main remedy which Jesus offers to the social ills of the systems of domination in our world is the practice of spirituality in secret. This is not about being modest in prayer or not talking about one's faith in public. It is about really connecting with God. Only when we learn to surrender are we able to allow God into our brains and into our lives to heal them. Jesus' actions and teachings followed the same pattern. He did not seek social status or power according to the ways of the empires of his time. In fact, he was willing to face death instead of using the means of violence and control to spread his message.

In a way, the instructions about giving, prayer, and fasting echo Jesus' own experience of spiritual formation in the wilderness! When he was being tempted by the devil, he had to face the same pressures of power, control, security, and the need for survival. He resisted these temptations because his mission as an agent of the Kingdom of God was to show the futility of the values of domination of the other kingdoms. The followers of Jesus are invited to follow in his footsteps to let go of the pressures to find happiness in security, control, success, and power.

What does contemplative prayer look like for us today? Here are some suggestions from Mike McHargue:

1. Talk to God: This is the easiest and most accessible. Reflect on the idea that God loves you and delights in time spent with you. Then talk to God as you would talk to a close friend...The most important part here is to focus on God's love.
2. Basic Meditation/Focus on Compassion: The goal in compassionate meditation is to relax, become aware, and then focus on a mantra (a calming word or phrase) or an image of peace or compassion. The former could be as simple as "All is well" or "God" or "Love"; the latter could be a field of flowers in bloom or the face of someone you love...If doing this with your eyes closed is too difficult, I've often found that it helps to fix my gaze on a lit candle and imagine that the candle is the warmth of God's love.
3. Centering Prayer: In centering prayer, you sit in silent contemplation. There is no goal, no insight to receive, just stillness in the presence of God. Start by relaxing and focusing your attention on your breath. Think of each breath as a gift, nourishing you, sustaining you, and requiring no effort to receive. Rest your attention on your breath without trying to control it in any way. If any thoughts or feelings (or sensations) enter your mind, simply notice them and then return your attention to your breath...If you find it difficult to maintain focus in this exercise, scientists have found that adding small, intentional movements or vocalizations can help quiet the mind...Research shows that it can take weeks to get the knack of a centering prayer practice, but once the knack comes, it's one of the surest ways to feel God's presence.
4. Prayer with Scripture/Lectio Divina: The ancient practice of Lectio Divina (or "Divine Reading") can help by offering the benefits of meditation in a more externally structured practice...Begin by selecting a Scripture passage. Not anything too long –one "scene" in a narrative book or one chapter in Psalms will do. A scene in the Gospels where Jesus interacts with someone works well, too. Next, read the passage three times. On the first pass, listen for any words or phrases that resonate with you. Don't overthink this...On the second pass, read with those words and phrases already in mind. What do you feel? How does the Scripture relate to your life circumstances?...On the third reading, think about what action you might take in regard to that situation, as guided by the Scripture. Some ask, "What is God inviting me to do?"
5. Terra Divina: The goal of this prayer is to get to know nature as your kin. Take time to be in nature letting your attention be caught by something wild. Then spend time pondering the part of nature that is trying to speak to you. Without rushing, allow whatever has caught your attention to carry your prayers, feelings, and yearnings. The last piece of the prayer is to allow the encounter to help you enjoy the sacred presence of God.

Some guidelines:

1. Don't Judge: Let go of any self-judgment –you literally can't fail at prayer.
2. Relax: Take time to breathe slowly and deeply and let go of distractions during prayer.
3. Be Aware: Prayer is most powerful when it expands our awareness.
4. Practice Intent: Start with an intention that leads to focus on God's love and grace.

We will end with the Lord's Prayer which is part of Jesus' teachings about prayer. We will use Lectio Divina for listening to this scripture. I will read the verses three times and invite you to listen first to a word or phrase that connects with you. Then you will be invited to pay attention to a feeling around your word. Lastly, you will be invited to pay attention to a message from God around your word and feelings.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

Amen.