

Centering Prayer Exercise

"To quiet the heart and rest in God alone."

Centering prayer is a form of contemplative prayer where the prayer seeks to quiet scattered thoughts and desires in the still center of Christ's presence.

***"My soul finds rest in God alone."
(Psalm 62:1)***

Centering prayer is not something new. Nor is it a New Age thing. It is an ancient form of prayer that joined meditation on a word of Scripture with prayer. It provided a simple way to center one's life in God's presence. In the 1960s and 1970s three Cistercian monks, Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington and William Meninger, sought to revive this ancient form of meditative prayer. Centering prayer is distinctively different from practices of Eastern meditation that attempt to clear the mind of all thoughts. Centering prayer allows for the recognition of thoughts and gently releases them into the hands of God. This form of prayer relies on the awareness that the Holy Spirit resides in the one who prays, connecting them heart to heart with God.

This prayer may seem mysterious to some because it depends so little on words. We do not give God information about all our needs, projects, ideas, programs, plans and agendas. We don't suggest things we would like him to do. We sit in the presence of God and give him our undivided love and attention. Generally, the only words that are spoken in centering prayer are the prayer words that continually bring our drifting attention back to God. The prayer word is a simple word like Jesus, love, peace, Father, or a phrase from Scripture that encapsulates the intent of the heart to be with God. With this word we linger with God and open ourselves to his presence.

Because centering prayer is a way of being with Jesus that doesn't cover prayer concerns, some people wonder if it counts as real prayer. Furthermore, if it doesn't make you feel or experience something particular, what does it do? It is never possible to judge the value of any prayer based on feeling or experience alone. Experiences are not the point. In centering prayer the goal is to so dwell in Christ that the fruit of this dwelling begins to show up in your life. Centering praying may "do" nothing at the moment. You sense no rapture, no mystical bliss. But later, as you move out into the busyness of life, you begin to notice that something has shifted. Your quiet center in Christ holds. Centering prayer trusts that being with Jesus brings transformation. The words of Isaac of Stella capture the heart of centering prayer: *"May the Son of God who is already formed in you, grow in you, so that for you He will become immeasurable, and that in you He will become laughter, exultation, the fullness of joy which no one can take from you."*

Source: The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, Adele Calhoun,, IVP (2005)

A Short Method for Centering Prayer

1. Set aside a minimum of fifteen minutes (increase the time as you can). Set a timer if that helps you to be less concerned about when to stop.
2. Settle into a comfortable position.
3. Intentionally place yourself in the presence of God, in the center of his love.
4. Choose a simple word, phrase or verse from Scripture that expresses your desire for God (e.g., love, peace, grace, Jesus, great Shepherd). Let this word guard your attention.
5. Take time to become quiet. It is not unusual for the first minutes to be filled with many noisy thoughts. Don't worry about them or pay attention to them. Let them go. Gently return your attention to the center of God's presence and love by repeating your word. When your thoughts wander let them drop to the bottom of your mind. Don't go after them. Gently return to the presence of Christ through repeating your word. Let the word draw your attention back to Jesus. Be with Jesus. Listen. Be still. When distractions persist let one of the following images help you return to Jesus.
 - Imagine that God's river of life runs through you. Deep down, the river is calm and slow. But on the surface there is rushing and debris. Imagine your distracting thoughts are part of the debris floating in the current. Don't try to capture these thoughts; release them and let the river of God's life carry them away. Anytime you are distracted, let the distractions go with the river. Gently return to the presence of Christ with your prayer word.
 - Imagine that you are visiting a friend who lives on a busy city street. Because it is a warm day, the windows are open and all the noise and bustle of life float into the room through the window. At times you are conscious of sirens or people talking or children laughing, but your attention is devoted to your friend and you do not let your mind follow the sounds outside. As you meet with Jesus, acknowledge the noisy distractions that pull at your attention, but continually return to the moment with Jesus through your prayer word.
6. Rest in the center of God's love. Trust that the Holy Spirit who abides in the depths of your spirit to connect you with God.
7. Take several minutes to come out of prayer. Don't hurry. Breathe in the presence of Christ. Offer yourself to God for the tasks awaiting you (e.g., "I am yours," or "Remain with me").

Reflection Questions

- How do you express your desire for God?
- Is praying your desire and love for God difficult? What does this tell you about yourself and your view of God?
- What is it like for you to spend time with God when you are not speaking to him?
- What happens inside you when you are quiet with God?

