



# CENTERING PRAYER

*But as for you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:6 NASB).*

**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 provides a simple way to center one's life in God's presence. 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 (such as scattered thoughts and desires) and gently releases them into the hands of God (while in His presence). 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.

*It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer.* Rather, it prepares our hearts to hear from God as we experience His presence through the stillness of a heart and mind that has been quieted. It adds depth of meaning to all prayer and helps move us from a more active form of verbal prayer into a receptive posture of prayer as we "rest" in God. **Centering Prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God and as a movement beyond thoughts, words, feelings, actions, and conversation with Christ to communion with Christ.**

**THE SOURCE OF CENTERING PRAYER**, as in all methods leading to contemplative prayer ("looking at", "gazing at", "being aware of" God), is the Indwelling Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (1 John 3:24). The effects of Centering Prayer also tend to build communities of faith and bond the members together in mutual friendship and love.

**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 *God, Jesus, love, peace, trust, Abba, 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. In

Centering Prayer, the goal is to so dwell in Christ that the fruit of the 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 from the busyness of life, you begin to notice that something has shifted. Your quiet center in Christ holds. God loves meeting us in this manner the most since we are so clearly invited, “Be still and know that I am God” and the Psalmist speaks of quieting himself at times instead of crying to God (Psalm 46:10; 131:2 KJV).

## Centering Prayer Practices

1. Be invited (welcome) to this sacred space in which each of us is invited to access the silent place within us where the Divine presence awaits us. Intentionally place yourself in the presence of God, in the center of His love.
  - a. Be invited to now slow yourself. If it helps, close your eyes, letting go of the immediate environment that we are in.
  - b. If thoughts come as they usually do, do not resist them, do not retain them, do not react emotionally to them. If you notice you are thinking about them return ever so gently to the sacred word you have chosen as the symbol or gesture of your intention, be with God during this time to consent to His presence and action.
  - c. A simple or sacred word is one that expresses your desire for God (e.g., love, peace, trust, grace, Jesus, good Shepherd). Let this word capture and guard your attention. Again, the word you chose to express is our intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.
  - d. Let us pray in this way for these 10 minutes (increase the time as you can). Set a timer if that helps you to be less concerned about when to stop.
2. Sit in a comfortable position. Take time to become quiet. It isn’t unusual for the first minutes to be filled with many noisy thoughts and distractions. Don’t worry about them. Let them go. Gently return your attention to the center of God’s presence and love by repeating your sacred word. We introduce the sacred word inwardly as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton. 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 by repeating your word. Let the word draw your attention or awareness back to Jesus. **Focusing on one’s breathing may be more suitable if your sacred word isn’t working.** 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 as 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’re visiting a friend who lives on a busy city street. Because it’s 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, people talking, or children laughing, but your attention is devoted to your friend and you don’t 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.

- **Imagine that** you are sitting on the edge of a river and you see boats going by. Lock on to the boats going by just like a bad thought or a negative action that happened throughout the course of the day. Gently return to just sitting on the edge of the river and enjoy the water going by rather than staying focused on that boat. Let your word help you to return to your intention to sit there quietly before God in that peaceful space. Remember, there may be times that it may be not just one boat, there are times you may see a lot of boats. Give yourself a few minutes to get to that peaceful space.
3. **Should we fall asleep**, we continue with the prayer when we awake. When engaged with our thoughts, we return ever so gently to the sacred word. Thoughts are inevitable, an integral and a normal part of Centering Prayer. Thoughts include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections. They may be ordinary wanderings of the imagination or memories. Thoughts and feelings that come may bring feelings of attraction or aversion. Insights and psychological breakthroughs may come, as well as self-reflections such as, “How am I doing?” or, “This peace is just great!” They all arise from the unloading of the unconscious mind. When you realize you may have become engaged with any of these thoughts return gently to your sacred word, leading you back to an awareness of God’s presence.
  4. **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”).

**IT IS HELPFUL TO REMEMBER** that all we are doing is making ourselves available, to the best of our human ability that day, to receive the love of God pouring around and through us. God is doing the transforming in us whether we feel it or not. Everything that happens is a gift from God: our ability to ‘show up’ in the first place when there are so many other demands from the world – even our desire to show up on the days when we avoid it or forget to show up, our noticing, our frustration at not being able to pay attention for very long, and the rare moments when we glimpse the face of God gazing at us with love. It’s all a gift. And God is so touched, so delighted when we make even the smallest of steps.

**NOTE:** In Centering Prayer we avoid analyzing our experience, holding expectations, or aiming at any goal such as: having no thoughts, making the mind a blank, feeling peaceful, repeating the sacred word continuously, or achieving a spiritual experience. **Another Note is we may notice slight pains, itches, or twitches in parts of our body, or a generalized restlessness.** These are usually due to the untying of emotional knots in the body. We may notice heaviness or lightness in our extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness. In all cases we gently return to the sacred word and to focus on God (Romans 8:18-25).

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you express your desire for God?
2. How would you describe your prayer life in the area of your desire and love for God? Is this area of prayer one that comes easy for you or do you struggle with it? What do you think this tells you about yourself and your view of God?
3. What is it like for you to spend time with God when you’re not speaking to him?
4. What happens inside you when you are quiet with God?

## CENTERING PRAYER'S GOD-GIVEN FRUIT

- Keeping company with Jesus, trusting that he is working in you while you pray.
- Living in more awareness of your union with Christ.
- Bringing stillness into the busyness of life.
- Learning to listen to God.
- Seeking God's presence and assistance in all things.
- Learning to hold Scripture in your heart.
- Resting in God's will rather than your own agenda.
- Developing a quiet center within that isn't attached to outcomes.

## Insights from Father Thomas Keating Addressing Common Queries on Centering Prayer:

### 1. Is there a right or wrong way to pray?

How you pray is not as important as the reason why you pray. It's the motive. Just the desire to pray is always a success no matter how difficult or how much a failure we experience.

### 2. The noise bothers me when I meditate. How can I decrease this distraction?

The first principle is not to resist the noise. As soon as you resist it you start thinking about it more. Just accept it and let it be. Move on sounds like a good solution.

### 3. Is it all right to fall asleep when I meditate?

Fortunately, God loves us as much as when we are asleep as when we are awake. It could be that the best response is to thank God you got a little extra snooze. And if this time when you wake up, then you can just start over. It is important not to take our faults or failures seriously. This is a real apprenticeship, so we are bound to make many mistakes. And I don't think these mistakes matter to God as long as you are working on them.

### 4. Can I meditate even though I haven't done all the steps?

Yes, although, there are a lot of haunted patterns of thoughts in our minds that need to be attended to by our emotional and mental health before we can benefit "fully" from meditation, we have to remove these patterns of thought by doing the steps of mental and emotional health thoroughly. And until we address them, we can benefit fully from meditation and be able to keep the calmness and peace that we find from the meditation. It is said that both are integrated. Both are needed for holistic well-being.

### 5. Do you have to use a sacred word?

The sacred word gives us a way of returning to our intention to be in that quiet place. When a thought comes, we can use, for example, this image. Imagine you are sitting on the edge of a river and you see boats going by. Lock on to the boats going by just like a bad thought or a negative action that happened throughout the course of the day. Gently return to just sitting on the edge of the river and enjoy the water going by rather than staying focused on that boat. Let your word help you to return to your intention to sit there quietly before God in that peaceful space. Remember, there may be times that it may be not just one boat, there are times you may see a lot of boats. Give yourself a few minutes to get to that peaceful space. If the sacred word isn't working right now, some people feel more comfortable in just following their breath as a symbol of breath which really means the spirit of receiving the Holy Spirit into their inmost being and when they exhale of breathing out the love of the Spirit into all of humanity or into the atmosphere of wherever we are living. So, if for some reason after a reasonable try, the sacred word doesn't seem to work for you. You might think of just following the breath which is

not following it physiologically but simply noticing your breathing when you have a distraction or thought that you don't want.

**6. I struggle with too many trash thoughts when I try to meditate. So why try?**

As soon as you start thinking how bad these are, then you go to another thought, and it's worse than the first one because it has an emotional charge to it that upsets or takes you away from silence even more so the thoughts can't do you any harm unless you think about them or want them. And so, by disregarding them, letting them go is about all we can do. And gradually the habit forms of letting go of them more and more promptly. Then a deeper peace occurs and then eventually you get to ignore most of them not all of them. Some of them get to you but you get better at it. It's important to give it a good try. To give it a good try, that is to say, if you are thinking of doing it and haven't done it on an everyday basis, think of giving it a 90-day trial. No money-back guarantee, however. The reward would be in experiencing what it's like to really have that discipline.

**7. What am I supposed to think about when I meditate?**

The discipline in centering prayer is precisely not thinking but it really means not thinking of anything particular so that when you are not thinking of anything particular and have the intention of being there with God and loving God then there gradually develops a general loving attentiveness that has no thought content which is just a presence or a sense of God's presence or a peace or a sense that everything is okay or being forgiven or that God is close. So what God is really doing in the centering prayer practice is affirming our basic goodness and as that conviction develops in us and heals ourselves, our doubts, and guilt feelings or shame or humiliation or the sense of having failed God or feeling betrayed by God or whatever it is. All these thoughts are for the birds. They don't please God at all, and they just get us upset. So, the idea is just to endure the thoughts that are going by without thinking about any thoughts. You don't have to be afraid of thoughts because beyond them is always the silence of God. And so, even if you are bombarded with thoughts, even between the various words, there is a certain moment or split second of silence and God is right there always sort of peeking through between the sounds of the word so it's good to take a friendly attitude towards the thoughts because you're sure going to have them and just to say hello and goodbye. Let them come and let them go. And when they get a little aggravating or attractive or cause an aversion ever so gently return to the sacred word or the sacred breath. So, it's really an exercise of the love of God, and the less self-motivation the better it goes. In other words, to look for peace or to look for a spiritual experience is to misunderstand what love is which is simply giving ourselves way to God again and again.