

Using the Jesus Prayer

By Fr. Dn. Charles Joiner

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

This prayer has the potential to transform your consciousness and bring you closer to God. It is a prayer rooted deeply in the tradition of the Church. It is a prayer to be repeated over and over, many times. You can begin to develop the use of this prayer by incorporating a number of repetitions in your daily prayer rule. It is a simple prayer and you can learn to say it everywhere and at any time. In fact, your aim should be to make it an unending prayer. In this way your whole life becomes a life of prayer.

Recognize, however, that this prayer is incredibly difficult to practice even though it seems to be very simple. In its practice, you continually recite it so that it permeates your heart and focuses your mind, predisposing you to follow God’s will instead of your own ego-directed will.

Start by repeating it for ten minutes in the morning or evening. Begin by saying it out loud or at least by moving your lips. Eventually you will repeat it mentally, but start with a verbal prayer. Add more repetitions, slowly building up the time you are able to concentrate on the prayer. When your mind wanders, bring it back to the prayer. Concentrate, but do not be harsh on yourself. This is not something you will master with your self-will. Ask God to help you conquer the restlessness of your mind. With persistence, humility and patience, the practice of this prayer will prepare you for God’s grace to work actively within you.

Along with saying this prayer as part of your prayer rule, try to say it whenever you can. You can do this while walking, while waiting in the doctor’s office, in line at the post office, or while waiting to board a plane. You can say it when doing dishes or yard work. You can say it when you are stressed, afraid, or nervous. When you become angry, repeat this prayer over and over until your anger subsides. Do this whenever your mind is agitated, and you will find that it will calm your mind. When you do say it, be sure to think of God and His endless love and seek His mercy.

The practice of the Jesus Prayer is different than Far-Eastern Buddhist, Hindu or Sufi practice. In Buddhism, a common practice is to constantly repeat a mantra such as “Om mani padme hum.” The aim of Buddhism is to free oneself from all suffering and attain what the Buddha called “Nirvana” or the perfect peace of mind. This peace of mind is achieved through various meditation techniques. The Buddha never taught about any form of God. Many practice this form of meditation to gain calmness in their lives. Sufism is a branch of Islam that also employs forms of meditation. Sufi scholars define Sufism as “a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else but God.” In meditation they aim to reach an awareness of their oneness with the universe, believing that in doing so they can attain fundamental truths that are within us, but often remain hidden. They do not believe that Jesus is God, but view Him as only a prophet. In Hinduism the chief aim is to gain release from the cycle of reincarnation caused by karma – the consequences of past actions, in this or in previous lives! This is achieved through meditation techniques. This release leads to some kind of absolute Truth. Many of these approaches have been adapted by our modern culture to serve as means of relaxation or ways to lessen the stress of our over-active lives. They form the basis of the “New Age” spiritual movement.

They are taught without any specific aim of repentance, nor the purpose of doing the will of God, nor of seeking union with Christ.

The use of the Jesus Prayer is done with an attitude of repentance and humility seeking an encounter with the living Christian God, Jesus Christ. We may gain benefits of relaxation or reduced stress, but this is not the aim of our effort. Union with God is. It is NOT a mantra to simply quiet the mind. You will also gain this benefit if you learn to repeat it hundreds of times, but it is important that you truly feel contrition for your sinfulness and seek God's mercy as you repeat it. All prayer is about a personal relationship with God.

Many Orthodox Christians use a prayer rope to aid them in concentration as they repeat the Jesus Prayer. Prayer Ropes come in a great variety of forms and sizes. Most prayer ropes have a cross woven into them or attached to mark the "end," and also have some kind of marker after each 10, 25, or 50 knots or beads. There are many forms of prayer ropes, some knotted of wool or silk, or other more elegant or simpler materials. At the time of our regular prayer, when you pray following your rule of prayer, hold the prayer rope with your hand between the thumb and the index finger and move from knot to knot each time you say the prayer. Do this until the number of repetitions in your rule have been completed.

"Just as it is impossible to fight battles without weapons, or to swim a great sea with clothes on, or to live without breathing, so without humility and the constant prayer to Christ it is impossible to master the art of inward spiritual warfare or to set about it and pursue it skillfully." Saint Hesychios