



## Learning to pray: The Jesus Prayer

The Jesus Prayer is a short sentence prayer—*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*—that is meant to be said in repetition. It is an ancient prayer that dates to at least the sixth century AD, and brief prayers like it that can be said at any point throughout the day have been used for even longer. They act as a sort of tether that connects our everyday life to God. It is sometimes easy to think of prayer as something very programmatic, and requiring serious thought and effort, but these 'arrow' prayers (a prayer that can be prayed at any point without hesitation or thinking, 'arrow' referring to the quickness with which an arrow can be released) remind us that we can offer our whole lives to God in prayer no matter our circumstances and no matter what we happen to be doing or where we happen to be.

The Jesus Prayer is a particularly important prayer for the Church, as it is both a summary statement of our faith and a prayer that moves beyond a statement of beliefs to a place of surrender—an acknowledgment of both who Jesus Christ is and who we are before him. In the prayer, Jesus is both the object of our desire and the foundation upon which our entire life depends.

Each word of the first half of the prayer is a declaration of who Jesus is. **LORD.** Here is an acknowledgment that Christ is creator and ruler of all. **JESUS.** Here we make the astonishing Christian claim that this Lord of all comes to us in the historic person of Jesus Christ. The God of the universe has made his home with us—Jesus is 'Emmanuel', God-With-Us. **CHRIST.** This word claims that this person who is both God above and a human being like us is the 'Messiah', the long-expected Saviour that we read about in the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible. **SON OF GOD.** This is a further statement that Jesus Christ is the Saviour God's people had been waiting for and of his divinity. This Jesus is the Lord of all, the Saviour of the world, and God the Son who brings us into a loving relationship with the Father.

But again, this prayer is much more than a statement of our faith. The second half of the prayer turns us towards the loving relationship God offers us:

**HAVE MERCY ON ME, A SINNER.** This is first an acknowledgment of God's great love for us in Jesus Christ, of the mercy available to us through him. Second it involves an acknowledgment of who we are—people who fall short of God's perfect love, sinners, in need of mercy. The first part of the prayer, an unflinching declaration of faith in Jesus Christ, the second, a surrender to the rich and complex relationship of God to creation in Jesus Christ. And the whole of the prayer is designed to move us towards that loving God of mercy, to move us beyond the hustle and bustle of our lives, beyond the distractions, and into the loving embrace of God's mercy. While this prayer can teach us a lot about who God is and who we are, it is not primarily a prayer of the mind, meant to engage us in thoughts about God, it is primarily a prayer of the heart, designed to move us toward God.

The Jesus Prayer is used in various ways:

1. It can still us and bring us before God in a period of silence. The Jesus Prayer can help to centre our day on Christ by a short period (maybe 10 minutes or so) of sitting in silence and saying the prayer repetitively. This can be done in consonance with our breathing. As we breathe in we pray, 'Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God,' and as we breathe out, 'have mercy on me, a sinner'.
2. This prayer can be said as an 'arrow' prayer throughout the day. As we walk along the street or go about our work, we can acknowledge God's presence with us and set our hearts on God through praying the Jesus Prayer.
3. Either during an intentional period of silence or steadily throughout the day, a prayer rope or prayer beads can be used as a way of focussing our entire selves, mind and body, on Christ. Passing beads through our fingers as we pray the Jesus Prayer can help us to engage our whole selves with God and to remain focussed and undistracted.