

# 7 Easy Tips for Personal Prayer

## Fr. Ronald Rolheiser

**01 — Show Up.** There's no bad way to pray and no single starting point for prayer. The spiritual masters offer one nonnegotiable rule: you have to show up for prayer and show up regularly. Everything else is negotiable and respects your unique circumstances.

Most days, we don't pray simply because we don't quite get around to it. Perhaps the best metaphor to describe our hurried and distracted lives is that of a car wash. For most of us, that's just what our typical day does to us—it sucks us through. Prayer is truly a discipline. Show up!

**02 — Quiet Your Heart.** Solitude is a form of awareness, a way of being present and perceptive within all of life. It's having a dimension of reflectiveness in our daily lives that brings gratitude, appreciation, peacefulness, enjoyment, and prayer. It's the sense, within ordinary life, that life is precious, sacred, and enough.

Solitude isn't something we turn on like a water faucet. It needs a body and mind slowed enough to be attentive to the present moment. The first step is to remain quietly in God's presence in solitude, silence, and prayer. If it is your first time doing this, set aside 15 minutes for prayer.

**03 — Look Inside.** Our culture can keep us so entertained, busy, preoccupied, and distracted that we lose all focus on the deeper things. We can go along like this for years until a crisis suddenly renders empty all the stimulation and entertainment in the world. Then we're forced to look into our own depth, and that can be a frightening abyss if we've spent years avoiding it.

We have to know when it's time to unplug the television, turn off the phone, shut down the computer, silence the iPod, lay away the sports page, and resist going out for coffee with a friend, so that, for one moment, we're not avoiding making friends with the deepest part of us.

**04 — Establish a Routine and Stick with It.** The solution isn't so much new prayer forms and more variety, but rhythm, routine, and established ritual. What's needed is a prayer form that doesn't demand an energy you cannot muster on a given day.

What clear rituals provide is prayer that depends on something beyond our own energy. The rituals carry us: our tiredness, our inattentiveness, our indifference, and even our occasional distaste. They keep us praying even when we're too tired to muster up our own energy. Prayer has an ebb and flow. Sometimes we have a deep sense of God's reality, and sometimes we can't even imagine that God exists. Sometimes we have deep feelings about God's goodness and love, and sometimes we feel bored and distracted.

**At a deep level of our human relationships, the real connection between people takes place below the surface of our conversations.**

We begin to know each other through simple presence. Prayer is the same. If we pray faithfully every day, year in and year out, we can expect little excitement, lots of boredom, and regular temptations to look at the clock. But a bond and an intimacy will be growing under the surface—a deep, growing bond with our God.

**05 — Be Honest, Vulnerable, Bold.** What does it mean to be holy or perfect? To be perfect in the Hebrew mindset simply means to walk with God, despite our flaws. It means being in the divine presence in spite of the fact that we're not perfectly whole, good, true, and beautiful.

God asks us to bring our helplessness, weaknesses, imperfections, and sin to him, to walk with him, and to never hide from him. God understands that we'll make mistakes and disappoint him and ourselves. What God asks is simply that we come home, share our lives with him, and let him help us in those ways we're powerless to help ourselves.

Every feeling and thought we have is a valid entry into prayer, no matter how irreverent, unholy, selfish, sexual, or angry that thought or feeling might seem. Simply put, if you go to pray and you're feeling angry, pray anger; if you're sexually preoccupied, pray that preoccupation; if you're feeling murderous, pray murder; and if you're feeling full of fervor and want to praise and thank God, pray fervor. What's important is that we pray what's inside of us and not what we think God would like to see inside of us. No matter the headache or the heartache, we need only to lift it up to God.

**06 — Let Go of Anxiety and Shame.** The opposite of faith isn't doubt but anxiety. It isn't so much the fear that God doesn't exist as the fear that God doesn't notice our existence. Faith doesn't have you believe that you'll have no worries, or that you won't make mistakes, or that you and your loved ones won't sometimes fall victim to accident or sickness. What faith gives you is the assurance that God is good, can be trusted, won't forget you, and is solidly in charge. Faith says that God is real, God is Lord, and there's ultimately nothing to fear. We're in safe hands. Reality is gracious, forgiving, loving, redeeming, and absolutely trustworthy. Our task is to surrender to that.

If we're to take seriously the words of Jesus, "Change your life and believe in the good news," then the coldness and distrust brought upon us by shame must be overcome. Shame is powerful. Its bite is deep, the scars permanent.

Try to bring the warmth, trust, and spontaneity of childhood into your prayers with God, a God who delights in you and has no use for crippling shame. Jesus said: "Love each other as I love you" (Jn 15:12). The tail end of that sentence contains the challenge. Jesus loved us by becoming vulnerable to the point of risking humiliation and rejection. We must recover our childlike trust and try to do the same.

**07 — Listen for God's Voice and Accept God's Love.** We're surrounded by many voices. How do we recognize God's voice among and within all of these others? God is the author of everything that's good, whether it bears a religious label or not. Hence, God's voice is inside many things that aren't explicitly connected to faith and religion.

**Jesus tells us he's the Good Shepherd and his sheep will recognize his voice among all other voices. A sheep recognizes the voice of the one safeguarding it and won't follow another voice. The voice of God is the voice of someone who knows us intimately and calls each of us by name.**

We take for granted that anyone who sees us as we are (unlovely, weak, pathological, sinful, insubstantial) will, in the end, be as disappointed with us as we are with ourselves. We fear God because we've never experienced the kind of love that is manifest in God. We avoid God when we're most in need of love and acceptance. God is love, and only by letting that love into our lives can we save ourselves from shame and sadness. God understands us, accepts us, delights in us, and is eager to smile at us. Experiencing the unconditional love of God is what prayer, in the end, is all about.

Remember: your heart is made to rest in God. If Saint Augustine is right—and he is—then you can count on your restlessness to lead you into deeper prayer—the kind of prayer that leads to transformation and will not leave you empty-handed.

## Practicing the Way

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