

# Living the Jesus Prayer: A Brief Guide

---

 [spiritualityshoppe.org/living-the-jesus-prayer-a-brief-guide/](http://spiritualityshoppe.org/living-the-jesus-prayer-a-brief-guide/)

by Evan B. Howard

*“To call on Jesus perpetually with warm desire, full of sweetness and joy, fills the air of the heart with joyous stillness.”* Hesychius of Jerusalem, “Texts on Watchfulness and Holiness,” #91

If there is a single spiritual exercise which has had more influence upon the Eastern Church than any other— influence throughout the centuries, influence throughout the world, influence in the hearts of individuals and in the character of the Church as a whole—it has been the practice of the Jesus Prayer. The sources of this prayer come from the cries of those who sought Jesus: the tax collector (Luke 18:9-13), the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:22), the lepers (Luke 17:13), the blind (Luke 18:35-42). The Jesus Prayer itself is known in few variations, but the basic prayer is the following:

Lord Jesus Christ, [Son of God], have mercy on me, [a sinner].

The practice of the Jesus Prayer is simply the practice of saying this prayer, either aloud or mentally, again and again. As you allow this prayer to work its way into your soul you will find, as have those in centuries before, that the prayer serves many functions:

- It can be a confession of faith, summarizing the heart of the Gospel of grace.
- It can become an act of praise (emphasizing the first half),
- an act of confession (emphasizing the second).
- or an act of dependent submission (reflection on both halves)
- It can become a cry for help,
- a declaration of warfare in the face of one’s enemies,
- or a means of centering the heart toward Christ.

The mechanics of saying the Jesus Prayer vary with individual and situation. The prayer has often been linked with the rhythms of our breathing. Thus, for example, as we inhale we would recite the first half of the prayer, and as we exhale we would recite the second half of the prayer. Some encourage the cultivation of attention through “counting” the prayers by use of a prayer rope similar to rosary beads. Some speak of particular postures of prayer: sitting still and resting one’s chin upon the chest to focus the intellect upon the heart (this is where the phrase “naval gazing” comes from). In the well-known story, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, the prayer was recited while walking.

But much more important than mechanics is the matter of our spirit in prayer. Recitation of the Jesus Prayer is not accomplishment (how many time recited), nor magic (as if by so many prayers we might move the hand of God). By practicing the Jesus Prayer we are merely moving toward the sincere, heartfelt, undistracted, wholly-integrated expression of a simple prayer to God—but a prayer so simple that within that prayer, it might express the heart of all prayer.

**Why not try it?**