

# 1. What is prayer?

How do you pray? Describe your prayer. How does it make you feel? What is its purpose? How do you decide whether it has gone well?

If you ask a protestant “what is prayer,” you may hear that it is *adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication*. ACTS. But Paul tells us to “pray continuously,” and it’s hard to see how one could pray in this way at all times. Is there a broader definition of prayer by which one could pray continuously?

Is *liturgy* prayer? Song? Reciting Psalms? Wrestling with God? Enjoying the beauty of nature? Feeding the hungry?

Some speak of *resting in God*. What is that?

“Lift up your hearts:” What does that mean? How do you do it?

From the article in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1957/1974) on prayer:

- One type of prayer: adoration, thanksgiving, penitence, petition (“prophetic”)
- Another type: the “search for God ... which leads to the vision of God and union with and likeness to Him” (“mystical”)
- These two types have been distinguished as vocal prayer and mental prayer
- An early statement of this distinction by John of Damascus: “Prayer is either the ascent of the mind to God or the decently beseeching of him.”
- “Protestant piety confines itself almost exclusively to the prophetic type, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox devotion give a prominent voice to the mystical as well” [but is this changing?]

“Vocal prayer” is a slight misnomer because it can be silent, and “mental prayer” can be accompanied by the voice. Another way of describing the distinction between the two types of prayer: prayer of the *head* vs. prayer of the *heart*, or *rational* vs. *affective*, or *reason* vs. *love*.

*Prayer: vocal or mental*

*Mental prayer: meditation or contemplation*

*Meditation*: deliberate, systematic reflection upon some truth or passage of scripture, to instruct the mind, to move the will, and to warm the heart for prayer. This is a fundamental step in the life of prayer.

“Eastern” meditation focuses on awareness and intention and is designed to relax and re-integrate the soul, calm, lower blood pressure, etc.

Christian meditation seeks that, but also communion with God.

**Homework:** Work on reading the *Cloud* introduction, 1-2 pages a day, or meditate on John 14, a few verses a day. 15 minutes of reading/meditation, 5 minutes of prayer. Notice what you think about or say during prayer time.