Why Do We Pray?

By William A. Barry, SJ From [***God’s Passionate Desire***](https://www.loyolapress.com/products/books/ignatian-spirituality/gods-passionate-desire-by-william-barry-sj?utm_source=ignsp&utm_medium=blog&utm_campaign=bklst)

# Why do we pray? Do we pray for utilitarian reasons—because it benefits our physical or psychological health?

Honesty compels me to say that I often do pray for utilitarian reasons. First of all, most of my prayers of petition ask for some good result, either for me or for someone else or for all people.

Moreover, I feel contented when I remember in prayer the people who mean much to me, even if my prayer is not answered. I notice, too, that I feel better about myself when I pray regularly.

I feel more centered, more in tune with the present, less anxious about the past or the future. So I suspect that I do pray for the purpose of psychological or physical health. But does that exhaust my motivations for prayer?

# Prayer Is a Relationship

Thinking of prayer as a conscious relationship, or friendship, with God may be illuminating. Why do we spend time with good friends? As I pondered this question, I realized that I relish times with good friends for some of the same reasons just adduced for spending time in prayer. If I have not had good conversations with close friends for some time, I feel out of sorts, somewhat lonely, and ill at ease. When I am with good friends, I feel more whole and alive.

Still, I do not believe that my only reason for wanting time with them is to feel better. I want to be with them because I love them. I am genuinely interested in and concerned for them. The beneficial effect that being with them has on me is a happy by-product. Moreover, I have often spent time with friends when it cost me trouble and time, and I did it because they wanted my presence. Haven’t we all spent time with a close friend who was ill or depressed, even when the time was painful and difficult? Such time spent cannot be explained on utilitarian grounds. We spend that time because we love our friend for his or her own sake.

Of course, there are times when we need the presence of close friends because we are in pain or lonely. Friendship would not be a mutual affair if we were always the ones who gave and never were open to receive. But if we are not totally egocentric, we will have to admit that we do care for others for their own sakes, and not just for what we can get from the relationship. We spend time with our friends because of our mutual care and love. Can we say the same thing about our relationship with God?

# Our Deepest Desires

Prayer is a conscious relationship with God. Just as we spend time with friends because we love them and care for them, we spend time in prayer because we love God and want to be with God. Created out of love, we are drawn by the desire for “we know not what,” for union with the ultimate Mystery, who alone will satisfy our deepest longing. That desire, we can say, is the Holy Spirit of God dwelling in our hearts, drawing us to the perfect fulfillment for which we were created—namely, community with the Trinity. That desire draws us toward a more and more intimate union with God.

We pray, then, at our deepest level, because we are drawn by the bonds of love. We pray because we love, and not just for utilitarian purposes. If prayer has beneficial effects—and I believe that it does—that is because prayer corresponds to our deepest reality. When we are in tune with God, we cannot help but experience deep well-being. [**Ignatius of Loyola**](http://ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-voices/st-ignatius-loyola/) spoke of consolation as a sign of a person’s being in tune with God’s intention. But in the final analysis, the lover does not spend time with the Beloved because of the consolation; the lover just wants to be with the Beloved.

# Thanks and Praise

Another motive for prayer is the desire to praise and thank God because of his great kindness and mercy. In contemplating Jesus, we discover that God’s love is not only creative but also overwhelmingly self-sacrificing.

Jesus loved us even as we nailed him to the cross.

If we allow the desire for “we know not what” to draw us more and more into a relationship of mutual love with God, then we will, I believe, gradually take as our own that wonderful prayer so dear to [**St. Francis Xavier**](http://ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-voices/16th-and-17th-century-ignatian-voices/st-francis-xavier-sj/) that begins *O Deus, ego amo te, nec amo te ut salves me*: “O God, I love you, and not because I hope for heaven thereby.” [**Gerard Manley Hopkins**](http://ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-voices/18th-and-19th-century-ignatian-voices/gerard-manley-hopkins-sj/) translated the prayer:

I love thee, God, I love thee—

Not out of hope for heaven for me

Nor fearing not to love and be

In the everlasting burning.

Thou, my Jesus, after me

Didst reach thine arms out dying,

For my sake sufferedst nails and lance,

Mocked and marred countenance,

Sorrows passing number,

Sweat and care and cumber,

Yea and death, and this for me,

And thou couldst see me sinning:

Then I, why should not I love thee,

Jesu so much in love with me?

Not for heaven’s sake, not to be

Out of hell by loving thee;

Not for any gains I see;

But just the way that thou didst me

I do love and will love thee.

What must I love thee, Lord, for then?

For being my king and God. Amen.

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Taken from <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-what-how-why-of-prayer/why-do-we-pray/>