

**SMALL
GROUP
GUIDES**
from HarperOne

Learning *to Pray*

A GUIDE FOR EVERYONE

JAMES MARTIN, SJ

For more free reading and discussion guides, visit: SmallGroupGuides.com
For religion news, sneak-peeks, and discounts on Christian e-books, visit: NewsandPews.com

CHAPTER 1: EVERYONE CAN PRAY

1. James Martin, SJ, opens his book with the declaration “Everyone can pray” (p. 1). Do you believe that? Why or why not?
2. Martin offers ten reasons why believers don’t pray (pp. 3–9). Which ones do you see most frequently in others? Which ones do you see most frequently in yourself?

CHAPTER 2: WALKING TO SCHOOL

1. “Children often relate to God in any way they please. This allows them to be more open with God than adults are” (p. 24). Can you remember a time when you felt the freedom to relate to God in this way as a child?
2. Martin writes, “As I look back on my ordinary childhood experiences, then, I can distinguish three common ways of prayer: first, petition; second, conversation; and third, moments of mystical experience” (p. 24). What experiences, if any, with these three forms of prayer did you have in your own childhood? How did they shape your faith?

CHAPTER 3: WHY PRAY?

1. Martin describes ten reasons to pray in this chapter (pp. 26–33). Which reason is most compelling to you? Why?
2. If you currently pray, how would you describe your motivation to do it? If you don't pray, how would you describe why you don't?
3. Do you believe Martin's suggestion that the real reason for prayer is that God is inviting us into prayer? That the desire for prayer comes from God? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 4: PRAYING WITHOUT KNOWING IT

1. What frustrations with prayer do you have, if any? What do you wish the experience of praying was like for you? In other words, what hopes do you have for prayer? Can you express these desires to God?
2. What are some ways you might already be praying “without knowing it” (p. 37)? What might this realization teach you about the nature of prayer itself?

CHAPTER 5: WHAT IS PRAYER?

1. What is prayer? Before reading this chapter, how would you have answered this question? How would you answer it now?

2. “In time, you’ll come up with your own definition of prayer. More important, you’ll experience prayer. And experiencing it is more important than defining it” (p. 59). How do you hope your experience of prayer will change or develop over time?

CHAPTER 6: BEGINNING A FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

1. Do you consider God as your friend? Do you think God desires your friendship? Why or why not?
2. Martin writes about being encouraged to “mine what we know about human relationships for ways to understand our relationship with God” (p. 60). As you think about your human relationships, what about these relationships helps you understand your relationship with God?

CHAPTER 7: EVERYONE NEEDS HELP

1. There is, says Martin, a “common belief that we shouldn’t ask God for help, or that asking for help is childish, or that it is a lesser form of prayer, or that it is wrong” (p. 92). Have you ever felt this way? After reading this chapter, are you more comfortable asking for help?
2. Does it come more naturally for you to pray for yourself or for others? Why do you think that is?

CHAPTER 8: NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP

1. What role do “rote prayers” play in your faith community (p. 118)? What role do they play in your personal prayer life?
2. “Rote prayers are a wonderful way to encounter God. Enjoy rote prayers—but don’t let your spiritual life become rote” (p. 132). Can you think of some of the strengths and weaknesses of rote prayers?

CHAPTER 9: I AM HERE

1. Have you ever prayed “the examen” (p. 138)? If so, what has been your experience with this popular form of prayer?
2. Martin writes, “The examen is an antidote” (p. 153). What does he mean by this? How might you use the examen in your personal prayer life moving forward?

CHAPTER 10: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU PRAY?

1. Of all the things Martin says “happen in prayer” (p. 165), which have you experienced most often? Which have you experienced least often?
2. What has been the most surprising thing you have experienced in prayer?

3. Have you ever had a mystical experience in prayer (pp. 205–212)? If so, describe it.

CHAPTER 11: HOW DO I KNOW IT'S GOD?

1. “How do I know what’s coming from God and what’s coming from me?” (p. 214). Before reading this chapter, how would you have answered this question? How would you answer it now?
2. Learning to distinguish between God’s voice and our own thoughts can be one of the most challenging aspects of prayer. Martin offers seven questions to help (pp. 227–232). Which of these questions seems most helpful in establishing or growing your own prayer life? Why?

CHAPTER 12: THE GIFT OF IMAGINATION

1. How does imagination function in your spiritual life in general and your prayer life in particular? Would you change anything about it?
2. Martin recounts a story of Timothy Cardinal Dolan, whose retreat director “suggested that he simply hold the Infant Jesus” during a time of prayer (p. 254). This simple imaginative prayer left a lasting impact on Cardinal Dolan. Is there one scene in the Bible that you’d like to enter into imaginatively?

CHAPTER 13: PRAYING WITH SACRED TEXTS

1. Martin mentions Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, who writes, “I find God largely in and through the Bible . . . It is for me the most important way to come to know, love, and serve God” (pp. 265–266). What is your relationship with the Bible today?
2. “Pray *lectio* in whatever way helps you encounter God through the sacred Scriptures or other writings. And let God encounter you in any way God desires (p. 273). How do you feel like God encounters you through Scripture? Are there any patterns or themes to those experiences?”

CHAPTER 14: FINDING GOD AT THE CENTER

1. “Like two rivers, two traditions of prayer flow through the history of Christian spirituality, the *apophatic* and the *kataphatic*” (p. 275). To which of these traditions are you more naturally drawn? Why?
2. “Centering prayer moves us to our center, where God dwells, waiting to meet us” (p. 278). What appeals to you about this form of prayer? What intimidates you?

CHAPTER 15: DISCOVERING GOD IN CREATION

1. “For people living during biblical times, creation was suffused with God’s presence. I still believe it is, and

I am not alone, but in many places today others no longer share that collective belief” (p. 287). What is lost when creation is no longer seen as “suffused with God’s presence”?

2. Are you able to connect with God in creation? If so, where does that happen most naturally?

CHAPTER 16: TALKING ABOUT PRAYER

1. Martin writes about spiritual direction, retreats, faith sharing, and journaling in this chapter. Which practice might you want to try or practice more regularly moving forward?
2. This chapter describes a spiritual direction conversation between “Joe” and “Cathy” (pp. 310–314). What did you learn about spiritual direction from this interaction?

CHAPTER 17: TOPICS IN PRAYER

1. How do you perceive challenges in your spiritual life in general and your prayer life in particular? Do you see them as threats to avoided, seasons for learning something new, or something in between?
2. Martin writes about “disentangling” certain “spiritual strands” (p. 350). What is he referring to here?

CHAPTER 18: NOW WHAT?

1. Prayer is “meant to move us ahead, to help us serve God and others . . . prayer should change us” (p. 356). Have you experienced that call to “change” in prayer? What did it end up changing?
2. How might God be leading you to serve others as a result of your time in prayer?

FINAL QUESTIONS

1. How did your understanding of prayer change, deepen, or expand from reading this book?
2. What prayer practices that you read about in this book might you want to try moving forward?
3. How has your understanding of God changed?