

# Our weak prayer lives

By [Peter W. Marty](#)

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I talk a lot about prayer in my life, and you may talk a good deal about prayer in yours. But let's be honest: we're pretty lousy at praying, at least in the fullest sense of the term. I don't mean this as an indictment of some rich spirituality that is in us. Our prayer lives are just so far from what they could be.

The other day my cell phone buzzed in the next room during some private prayer time. I had to make a decision: should I detour out of my reflective zone and peek at it? Our 19-year-old daughter is on the road; maybe something happened. Even if I found out the text wasn't from her, I doubt I would have been able to get out of my head the person who did send it. And avoiding peeking at the phone altogether was no perfect answer either—the vibrating buzz wouldn't leave my head. Its echo would only accelerate my conversation with God, allowing me to more quickly scoot in and skim the message. Oh, those distractions.

Then there are the conversations we have with ourselves during prayer. These little visits with our own minds aren't irrelevant; every conversation with another person has a self-reflective component. I have no illusion that there is such a thing as pure, unadulterated conversation with God.

So what is in that little visit with ourselves we have inside our head during prayer?

*Are*

*you sure you are doing this right? Is this little item really worth God's attention? Don't you think you're off on the balance between listening and speaking? This sounds like a whole lot of chatter on your part.*

In the early months of marriage, my wife and I tried praying out loud together each night. I think we spent more energy privately sizing up the other's grammar, language and perspective than we did zeroing in on God. These sorts of mind games that are internal to prayer seem unavoidable. But are they prayer at its best?

Martin

Luther made a connection between prayer and his dog's behavior in the presence of meat: "If I could only pray the way this dog watches meat. All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish, or hope." Our dog is the same. But more than just a focus to her eyes, there is an insatiable quality to her infatuation with meat. Savoring would not be the word that connects Murphy and meat. I sense no appreciation for the previous bite, only desperation.

So

maybe a dog isn't a very good image for praying—at least not for those of us who desire more than just a hunger for God. I wouldn't mind being changed from the inside out as well, and having the Holy Spirit take up residence within me. Wouldn't that be an awesome gift?

*Additional lectionary columns by Marty appear in the July 13 issue of the Century —click [here](#) to subscribe.*