

*Prayers with Pizzazz
for Junior High Teens*

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To Mom and Dad, Bitsy and Nick, who gave me my faith foundation and the greatest gift parents could give—the gift of love.

To my husband, Vic, and children, Stephen, Jason, and Nicole, who I love most dearly. They lovingly walk and stumble with me on my faith journey. Together we have crossed rocky roads, and we have uncovered rainbows.

And to my Aunt Pat B., whose faith has never wavered despite the obstacles she has withstood. She taught me that it is much better to be an active participant in your faith community than a passive one.

A special thanks to my parish, Saint William of York. The parish community and its members have helped nurture and inspire my faith growth.

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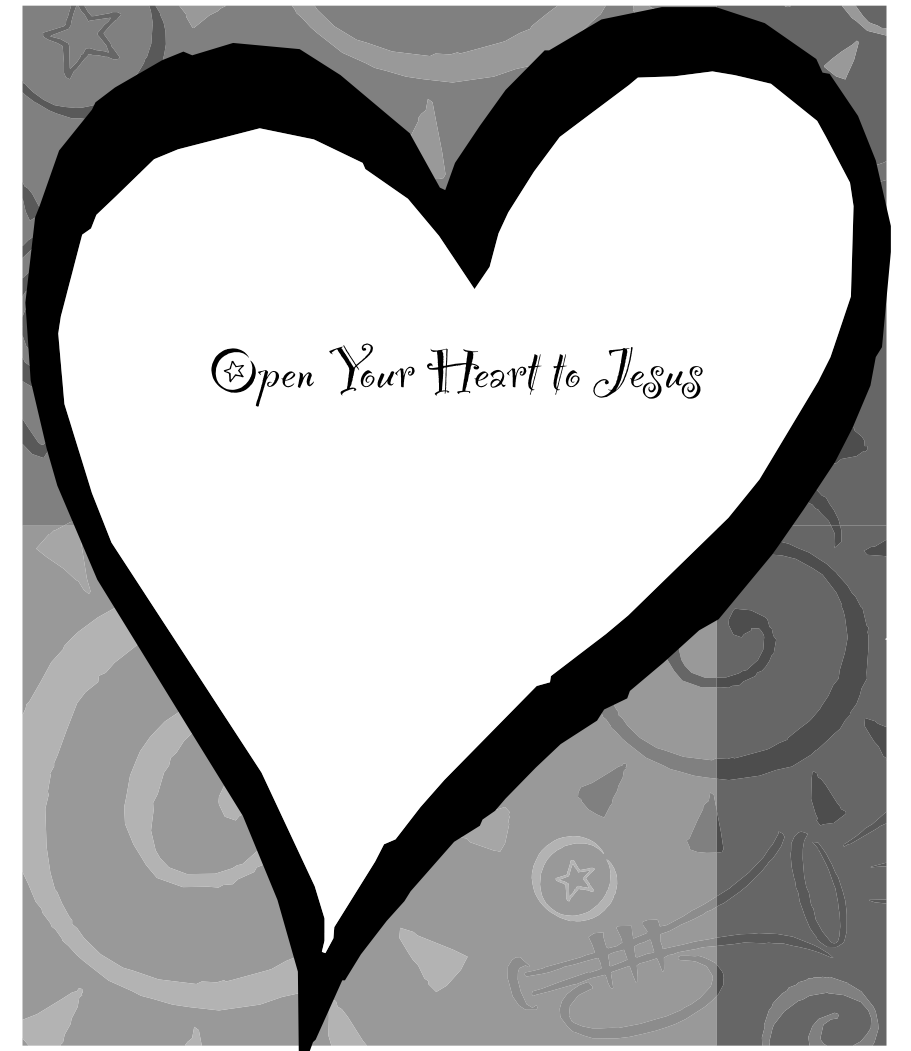
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Introduction



The Book How can I conduct new prayer experiences for the young people I work with? Where can I find a prayer resource that offers an assortment of prayer experiences that I can pick from? How can I motivate the youth to pray? What do dog food and sauerkraut have to do with a prayer experience?

The answers to all these questions are in this book, *Prayers with Pizzazz for Junior High Teens*. If you work with junior high

people, this book, with its wide range of prayer experiences, practical advice, and information, will be a big help to you.

The prayer experiences suit a variety of settings, such as catechetical lessons, group meetings, retreat activities, and prayer services. They are gathered according to six themes:

- “Mirror Images: Self-reflection”
- “Storytelling: Parables and Prayer”
- “My World: Global and Community Issues”
- “Heart-to-Heart: Love and Relationships”
- “Excuse Me: Sin and Forgiveness”
- “Broadcast the Good News: Mass Media and Prayer”

The prayer experiences contain motivational activities, scriptural readings, prayer handouts, and discussion or reflection questions.

The Background

This book comes out of my many years of working as a youth minister in a high school and as a religious education teacher with both high school and junior high people. My degree is in art education, and I have extensive teaching experience in middle school art. This textured background along with my creative thinking are reflected in the unique, sometimes slightly offbeat, prayer experiences you will find here.

One of the most important and motivating images I kept in mind when developing these prayer experiences was a two-sided picture of the young people I worked with. One side pictures them with blank looks, bored yawns, and tired faces. The other side projects them with eyes glimmering and alert, with excited expressions on their faces. These pictures served well to recall the frustration when a session bombed as well as the elation when a session or prayer service was successful.

A good example of one of the frustrating times is a session on sin and confession that I did with junior high students. The first attempt never got off the ground. As I frantically tried to get a discussion going, I was faced with blank looks. Only two people in the class had been to confession since their first penance. No one could relate to the value of confession. It was a teacher’s nightmare. I went home frustrated but determined to reach this class. This led to the development of the prayer experience in this manual titled “Dog Food, Sauerkraut, and Sin.” I mixed liver-flavored dog food and a can of sauerkraut in a bowl. After all the students were seated, I asked them to hold out their hands. I put a glob of the mixture in their hands. Then we discussed how it felt. Did the two ingredients fit together? How did having the glob on their hands limit what they could do? How was this similar to sin? (For a full description of the experience turn to chapter 5.) It was a huge success. Students still talk about it. Brothers and sisters of older students ask if they will get to do the dog food-and-sauerkraut experience. And I know all the students who have experienced this prayer will never look at dog food and sauerkraut without thinking

of sin and confession and a slightly offbeat teacher who believes prayer can be an experience—be it an activity, a discussion, a reading, a written exercise, a play, or whatever.

The Prayer Experiences

A handy acronym for remembering the essentials of effective and lively prayer experiences is HOPE. The letters in HOPE represent the following:

H = handicaps

O = opportunity

P = preparation

E = enthusiasm

Handicaps. Know your group’s strengths and weaknesses. An introverted group will be less likely to openly share feelings until the participants feel safe with one another and have had some previous experiences to build community. Use experiences that require less personal sharing until the participants are comfortable together. An immature group may require more control and discipline to stay with the task. A particularly mature group may not need as much regulation and direction. If you know the group’s strengths and weaknesses, you can use them to your advantage.

Opportunity. Be prepared for all opportunities. In other words, be flexible. Think on your feet. No procedure should be carved in stone. If an experience gets sidetracked, decide if it is in your best interest to stop and get back on track or if it is possible to turn an unexpected twist into a positive faith experience.

Preparation. Read and reread each prayer experience before you use it. Make sure you have all the necessary materials. Go over the experience with your young people in mind. Does the size or composition of the group warrant any changes in the experiences as given in this book? Who will lead the exercise?

Enthusiasm. Be positive. Your attitude affects the young people’s response to the experience. If you are not enthusiastic about or comfortable with the experience, your group will sense it, and no one will benefit.

If all four of the HOPE elements are mixed into the prayer experiences in this book, the experiences can give a significant boost to the young people’s faith development. The last and most important component is love—love for God and for young people. If what you do shows your love for God and the young people, every experience, no matter how seemingly unsuccessful, will help them grow in faith.

1

Mirror Images: Self-reflection



This chapter gives young people the opportunity to focus on themselves as unique individuals. It presents experiences that prayerfully touch upon hidden emotions, individual identities, faith, good and bad qualities, and personal talents. They prompt enlightened awareness of self as individuals and as persons related to God and others.

Bags and Prayer Experience 1 Hidden Treasure (45 minutes)

This prayer experience reflects on insecurity—a common condition of junior high people. The prayer emphasizes that everyone, sometime in their life, feels insecure. It provides an opportunity in a safe environment for the young people to talk about and respond to these feelings.

- Objectives**
- To make each person aware that at one time or another, everyone feels insecure
 - To build a safe community within the group
 - To help the young people identify and pray about the masks they hide behind and the emotions they try to conceal

- Materials**
- a large brown bag for each person
 - a copy of handout 1–A, “Masks,” for each person
 - pens or pencils
 - a large brown bag with two eyeholes cut out
 - a Bible

Activity Put on the bag with the eyeholes and read the following “Bag Poem” aloud to the group. Be prepared for a few snickers and laughs at first, but keep the young people in line and encourage them to listen seriously. Remove the bag at the appropriate spot of the poem.

- I keep my bag right with me everywhere I go,
In case I might need to wear it, so ME doesn't show.
I'm so afraid to show you ME, afraid of what you'll do.
You might laugh at ME, or say mean things. . . .
Or I might lose you.
I'd like to take my bag off, to let you look at ME.
I want you to try to understand, and please, love what you see.
So, if you'll be patient and close your eyes, I'll pull it off so slow.
Please understand how much it hurts, to let the real ME show.
Now my bag is taken off. I feel naked! Bare! So cold!
If you still love all that you see, you are my friend, pure as gold.
I want to save my bag, and hold it in my hand.
I need to keep it handy in case someone doesn't understand.
Please protect ME, my new friend, and thank you for loving ME true.
But, please let me keep my bag with me until I love ME, too.

(Author unknown, as quoted in
Fresh Elastic for Stretched Out Moms, Barbara Johnson
[Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1986], p. 122)

Explain that this poem reminds us of the insecurities we all feel at some time or another. We hide our feelings, we hide our emotions, and sometimes we even hide our personalities.

Direct everyone to put a paper bag on their head and then lead a discussion using the following questions:

- How does it feel to have a bag on your head?
- Does it feel safe to hide your emotions behind a mask or a bag?
- Why do we hide behind masks? How does hiding help us or hurt us in dealing with people?

Distribute handout 1–A, “Masks,” and ask the participants to write a prayer to Jesus in the space provided and, if necessary, on the back of the handout. Direct them to tell Jesus about the emotions they try to hide and the masks they hide behind. For example: Jesus, you know I’m lousy at basketball. When I get on the court and trip, the gang laughs at me and calls me a klutz. So I act like a comedian and mess up on purpose to make them laugh. I act like I don’t care. But you know I do. You love me for who I am.

Closing Due to the personal nature of this exercise—unless you have a very tight-knit group—do not ask the participants to share the prayers aloud. Read aloud Luke 12:22–31 or Matt. 6:25–34. End with the following prayer or one of your own:

- Lord, you have unlocked the insecurities within us. We stand here vulnerable. We trust that you will guide us to open up and share our true selves with each other. Be present with us when we slip and try to hide behind a phony mask. Give us the strength to stand up for our convictions and develop into mature Christian persons. Amen.

Boxes and Identity Prayer Experience 2 (75 minutes)

This prayer experience encourages the young people to explore their identity—both their outer self and their inner self. It provides them with an opportunity to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses.

- Objectives**
- To help the young people get in touch with their identity
 - To build a community atmosphere within the group

- Materials**
- one shoe box for each person
 - magazines
 - colored paper
 - markers
 - crayons
 - scissors
 - glue
 - a copy of handout 2–A, “My Identity Box,” for each person
 - pens or pencils
 - a candle
 - string

- a Bible
- a bowl
- matches

Activity Give each person an empty box with a lid, magazines, blank paper, markers, crayons, scissors, and glue.

Instruct the young people to paste on the outside of the box drawings and magazine photos that represent the things about themselves that they readily share with others. Next direct them to decorate the inside of the box with drawings and photos that represent the parts of themselves that they share only with people who know them very well. Then tell the participants to cut out a heart and set it in the box to symbolize the part of themselves that they never share with anyone but Jesus.

Distribute handout 2–A, “My Identity Box,” and ask the young people to complete the handout. Then tell them to fold the handout and put it inside their box. Direct them to close their box and tie it shut.

Invite the participants to share the meaning of the outside of their box and, if it seems appropriate, ask them to say something about how they decorated the inside. Do not ask what they keep only for Jesus.

Closing Form a circle around a table. On the table place an open Bible, an unlit candle covered by a bowl, and a book of matches.

Read Mark 4:21–22. Invite the participants to one at a time put their box on or around the table. Tell the last person to uncover the candle and light it. Then read aloud:

- We have symbolically taken the light out from under the bowl. So, too, we will strive to let the light of our personalities shine through. Help us to find true happiness with who we are as individuals.

Read Matt. 5:3–10. Conclude with “Amen.”

Faith, Crosses, and Me? Prayer Experience 3 (60 minutes)

This prayer experience examines the symbolism of the cross. It enables the young people to put their troubles or burdens in a faith perspective. The prayer encourages the young people to personally invite Jesus into their life.

- Objectives**
- To help the participants recognize the meaning of the cross in their life
 - To invite the participants to share situations when they felt overwhelmed and turned to Jesus
 - To help the participants accept Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins and invite Jesus into their life

- Materials**
- a Bible
 - a board of softwood (e.g., pine) about 6 to 8 inches wide and about 12 inches long, on which you have marked twelve dots in the shape of a cross
 - twenty nails with large heads
 - a hammer

Activity Read aloud the following selection, called “The Cross Room”:

- A man was praying to Jesus, telling him his burdens were too big and heavy a cross to bear. He asked Jesus to make his load lighter. Jesus answered him by calling him into a hallway with two doors. He put the man’s big heavy cross in the room of the first door. Then he told him to open the second door and choose an easier cross to bear. The man opened the door and saw a room filled with huge heavy crosses, some towering many feet above the man. Across the room, the man spotted a cross much smaller than all the other crosses. He chose that cross to take back out to the hallway with Jesus. He thanked Jesus for answering his prayers and told him how much lighter his load was to bear. Jesus looked at him and replied, “Son, that is the very same cross you came in with.” (Author unknown)

Conclude the story with the following reflection or one similar to it:

- At times we may be overwhelmed by things going on in our life. We can feel so overloaded. When we feel that way, we can turn our thoughts to Jesus and think about those who are carrying a much heavier load than we are. It really will make our burdens seem lighter, our cross easier to carry.

Then lead a discussion on the meaning of the cross, using the following discussion questions:

- Can you relate to the story?
- What burdens do young people have to deal with in the present world?
- Can you share a story about a time you have felt overloaded and turned to Jesus?
- What does the cross mean to you? Is it just an ornament you wear around your neck? It is just something your parents have on the wall?
- What is faith?
- Is the cross a symbol of faith?
- How does the thought of Jesus dying on the cross for each and every one of us affect us?

Close the discussion by reading John 19:1–37.

Closing Place on a hard surface the piece of softwood with the image of a cross, along with the hammer and nails.

Select young people to read aloud the following passages. After each reading allow one of the young people to hammer a nail

into the wood on one of the dots. When everyone is done, the nails will form a cross.

Col. 1:13–14

1 John 1:7

1 Pet. 2:21

1 Pet. 2:24–25

1 Tim. 3:16

Eph. 1:7

Gal. 1:3–5

Rom. 5:18

Rom. 4:23–25

1 John 2:1–2

Rom. 1:17

Col. 3:1–4

Close with the following prayer or one of your own:

- As we reflect on the impact of Christ nailed to the cross, his death, and his Resurrection, we personally choose to follow Jesus and accept Jesus into our hearts. Amen.
- Hang the wood with the nail cross.

Open Hearts Prayer Experience 4 (60 minutes)

This prayer experience reflects on positive and negative qualities in humankind in general. After the young people discuss these qualities, they are given the opportunity to visualize the qualities they possess.

- Objectives**
- To look at human qualities that are constructive and those that are destructive
 - To help the young people identify the qualities that Jesus would find if he looked into their heart

- Materials**
- masking tape
 - a large poster board heart, cut in two pieces
 - a large poster board heart, whole
 - magazines
 - scissors
 - glue
 - a copy of handout 4–A, “Open Your Heart to Jesus,” for each person
 - crayons
 - markers
 - a Bible

Activity Before the prayer experience begins, tape the whole heart and the broken heart to the wall.

Instruct the young people to cut out words and pictures from the magazines to illustrate all the constructive qualities, feelings, and images that they think they would find if they could see inside the whole heart on the wall, for example, a cross, faith, love, friendship, caring. Tell them to tape or glue their words and pictures on the whole heart.

Then direct the participants to cut out words and pictures to illustrate the destructive feelings or images that they think they would find if they could see inside the broken heart on the wall, for example, war, jealousy, prejudice. Let them tape or glue their words and pictures on the broken heart.

Use questions like the following to lead a discussion on the meaning of the photos and words on display:

- Why did you choose the pictures and words that you attached to each of the hearts?
- Is anything missing in either of the hearts?
- What kinds of situations or people shape those good and bad qualities?
- How can good qualities be nurtured?

Distribute handout 4–A, “Open Your Heart to Jesus.” Read aloud the directions on the handout and give the participants time to complete it. Let them spread out and find a quiet place to work.

Closing When everyone is done with the handout, regather the group and read aloud Rom. 5:1–11. Conclude with the following prayer or one of your own:

- God, we have spent time reflecting on positive and negative qualities. We have opened our heart to you, Jesus, in this prayer experience. Help us by nurturing and molding us to each be the best individual we can be. Amen.

Gifts from the Spirit Prayer Experience 5 (40 minutes)

This prayer experience encourages the participants to develop self-esteem by examining the talents and qualities they possess. It allows them to reflect on these talents and qualities and focus on areas in which they wish to grow.

Objectives

- To make each person aware of the positive talents and qualities she or he has and to recognize them as gifts from the Spirit
- To encourage the young people to focus on one or two qualities that they need to strengthen in their daily life

Materials

- nine index cards
- a copy of handout 5–A, “Gifts from the Spirit,” for each person
- a copy of handout 5–B, “Talents and Qualities,” for each person
- pencils or pens
- a copy of handout 5–C, “Nurturing These Qualities,” for each person
- a Bible

Activity Before the activity, write one of the following qualities on each index card: artistic, caring, truthful, open, honest, respectful, forgiving, athletic, and loving.

Begin the activity by asking the participants to play charades, using the qualities on the index cards as the word to act out. (Or use the words to play hangman.) Next read 1 Cor. 12:4–11 aloud.

Then distribute handout 5–A, “Gifts from the Spirit,” and handout 5–B, “Talents and Qualities.” Give the young people time to complete the checklist on handout 5–A, using handout 5–B as a reference.

Closing Distribute handout 5–C, “Nurturing These Qualities,” and tell the participants to complete the prayer on it, referring to handouts 5–A and 5–B if needed. When everyone is done, invite people to share their prayers with the group. End by reading 1 Cor. 13:1–10.

Personal Prayer at Home Prayer Experience 6 (30 minutes)

This experience introduces the young people to three different approaches to personal prayer that they can later practice at home. It offers the young people an opportunity to experiment with each approach to prayer and to find the ones they feel most comfortable doing by themselves.

Objectives

- To familiarize the participants with three different approaches to prayer

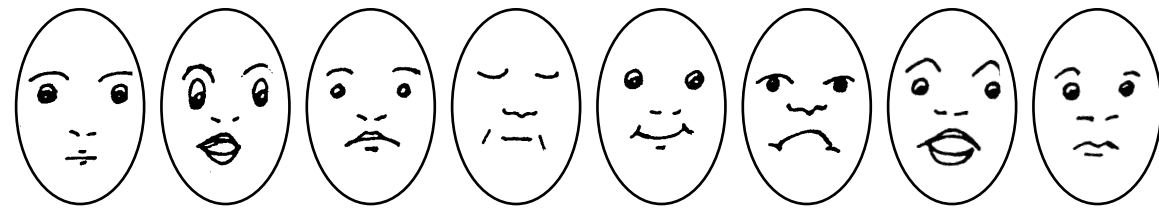
Materials

- a copy of handout 6–A, “The Empty Chair,” for each person
- a copy of handout 6–B, “Writing Prayer,” for each person
- a copy of handout 6–C, “Phone Prayer,” for each person
- pencils or pens

Activity Distribute handouts 6–A, 6–B, and 6–C (they may be given out one at a time or all at once) and read aloud the directions. Invite the participants to try each form of prayer following the directions on the handouts and to decide which approach they like best. Be available to offer help.

Then have the group indicate by a show of hands how many chose each of the prayer approaches. Finally, encourage the participants to take the prayer forms home and use them for their personal prayer.

Masks



M artistic • humorous • strong • weak • sad •
 happy • scared • frustrated • shy • angry •
A hysterical • curious • quiet • sorry •
 upset • lazy • bored • positive • exasperated •
 confused • alert • dizzy • timid •
 depressed • pessimistic • **S** shocked • confident •
 disillusioned • enraged • surprised •
 creative • smug • liberal • giddy • **K** imaginative •
 idealistic • optimistic • creative •
 suspicious • moody • hopeful • envious •
 astonished • exhausted • lonely • distracted • **S**
 desperate • clumsy • startled • conservative •

Write a prayer telling Jesus about the emotions you try to hide and the masks you hide behind. Use the back of this sheet if you need more room to write.

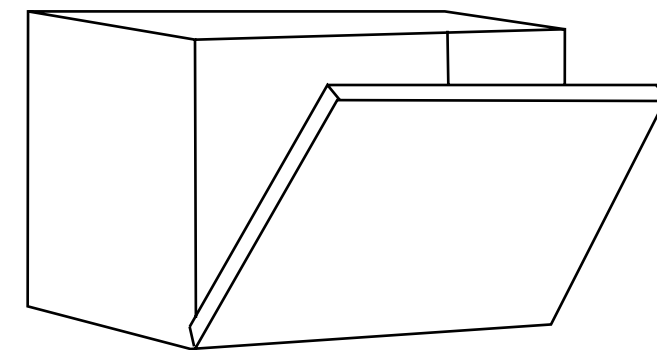
My Identity Box

Complete the following prayers in writing:

God, here I am! I'm unique! No one else is like me. Most of the time I like who I am. I know I have areas in which I need to improve or grow. Some of these areas are

I thank you for my strengths, talents, and good qualities, some of which are

Sometimes I don't open up and let people get to know the real me. Help me to become more open as I become more comfortable with who I am. Amen.



Open Your Heart to Jesus



Illustrate with words or a drawing what Jesus would find as you open your heart to him.

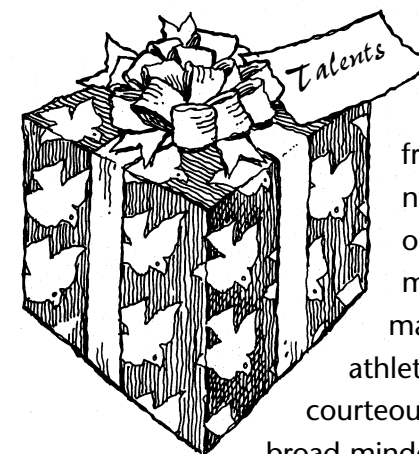
Gifts from the Spirit

Listed below are some of the qualities that one educator says a mature person will possess to some degree. Certainly none of us possesses all of these qualities fully, but together they represent a standard by which we can evaluate how we have been doing in life. Reflecting on our qualities can help give us direction for the future. Read each statement. Then to the right of each statement, put a check in the column that most accurately describes you in relation to that quality.

	A real strong point	Doing pretty well	Okay	Needs some work	Needs a lot of work
1. Capacity to accept failure					
2. Balance between thoughts and feelings so that neither controls me totally					
3. Respect for the past, present, and future—all three					
4. Ability to recognize the uniqueness of all people					
5. A sense of humor					
6. Compassion—the ability to identify with others' feelings					
7. Love for young children					
8. Appreciation of beauty					
9. Ability to meet others without suspicion					
10. Ability to recognize the splendor of the commonplace, acceptance of some routine in life					
11. Enthusiasm and excitement					
12. Ability to draw the best out of people					

	A real strong point	Doing pretty well	Okay	Needs some work	Needs a lot of work
13. Openness to mystery—realizing I don't know it all					
14. Acceptance of the need for authority					
15. Perseverance					
16. Ability to forgive others					
17. Belief that people are basically good at heart					
18. Capacity for worship—ability to sense the sacred part of life					
19. Capacity for silence and solitude					
20. Ability to adapt to change					
21. Commitment to physical well-being					

Talents and Qualities



- artistic • eager • loyal • caring •
- truthful • loving • self-disciplined •
- musical • sensitive • warm • witty •
- friendly • outgoing • intelligent •
- nurturing • modest • able to lead •
- optimistic • original • shy • creative •
- mechanical • organized • peaceful •
- mathematical • dramatic • generous •
- athletic • patient • kind • wise • noble •
- courteous • pleasant • respectful • humble •
- broad-minded • talkative • courageous • eloquent •

These are just a sampling of the many talents and qualities people can possess. Can you think of any to add to the list?

Which talents and qualities do you possess?

Are there any characteristics you wish you possessed? Are they talents or qualities you have to be born with or are they ones you can achieve? (For example, being musically inclined is something you are born with, but being patient is something you can work at to possess.)

(Adapted from Thomas Zanzig, *Sharing II* [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1985], pages 57–58)

Nurturing These Qualities

Reflect on the qualities that you feel you need to improve on. Fill in the blanks in this prayer, asking God's help in nurturing these qualities.

God, I know that I am weak in my daily life in the areas of

_____ and _____.

I know I possess these qualities but don't consistently make use of them on a daily basis. Help me to nurture these qualities in my life so that they become second nature to me. So that next time

_____ happens, I will respond by _____

_____.

Amen.

The Empty Chair

Pull up an empty chair. Sit facing the chair. Imagine Jesus in the chair. Talk to Jesus—beginning with a description of your day. Then talk to him about yourself. Listen to Jesus. How does he respond to you? Talk to him about the directions you are going in. How does he respond? (This exercise is adapted from *Sadhana: A Way to Prayer*, by Anthony de Mello [Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1978], page 78.)



Writing Prayer

Write your thoughts to Jesus. Use the form below or use the back of this sheet to write a poem, a rhyme, or a riddle. If something is troubling you, write it down, seal it in an envelope, and give it to Jesus. Your load will become lighter.

Dear Jesus,

Hi! Today was a _____ day.

I did _____.

It was _____.

I'm feeling _____.

_____.

I'll write again soon.

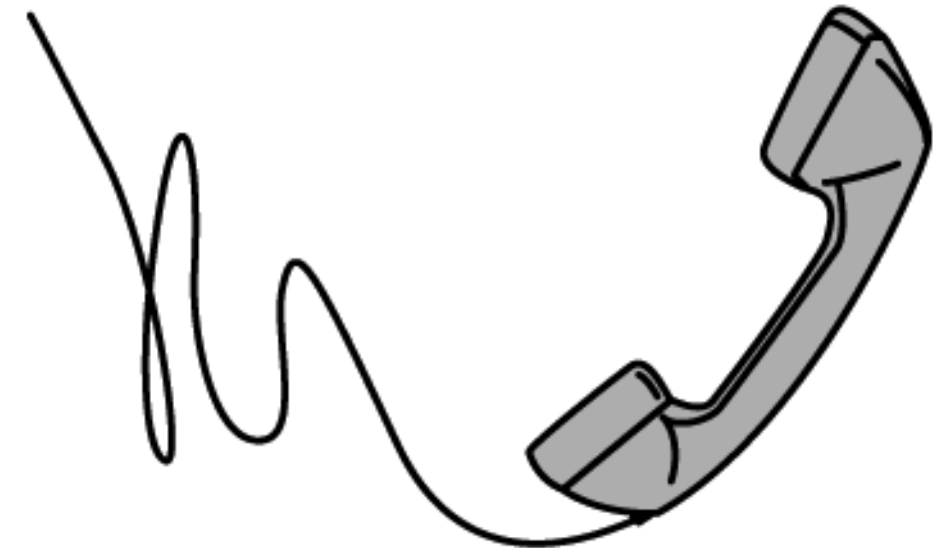
Love,

_____.

Phone Prayer

If you want to talk to a friend to share your happiness or sorrow and your friend is not with you, you can use the phone. Jesus is your constant friend. Imagine an open phone line between you and Jesus. Visualize picking up the phone and dialing heaven. Mary answers, "House of the Lord, may I help you?" . . . You ask for Jesus and begin talking. . . . Really concentrate on the dialog. . . . Talk to Jesus about your life. . . . How is Jesus responding to you?

It's that easy to talk to Jesus. It's never long distance, there are no busy signals, and he's always there: twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.



Jesus Christ
Savior
Friend
1-800-HEAVEN-1

Call toll free twenty-four hours a day.