



**“O Lord and Master of my Life”**

*Reflections on the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian*

When the church bell begins ringing slowly and sadly, when the services become filled with the sound of mournful chants, when the church and the priest are dressed in black vestments, – then the church resounds with the wondrous and deeply-moving words of the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian:

**“O Lord and Master of my life! A spirit of idleness, despondency, ambition and idle talk give me not. But rather a spirit of chastity, humble-mindedness, patience and love bestow upon me, Thy servant.**

**Yea, O Lord King, grant me to see my failings and not condemn my brother; for blessed art Thou unto the ages of ages. Amen.”**

After each part of the prayer a prostration is made. At the end of the entire prayer it is customary to bow from the waist twelve times, saying to oneself at each bow: “God, purify me, a sinner,” – after which the entire prayer is read once more, and at the end a single prostration is made. Such a number of prostrations testifies to the importance which our Orthodox Church imparts to this prayer.

The prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian is read only during the Great Lent, at the end of each service, except for Saturdays and Sundays. The priest comes out of the altar wearing only a black epitrahelion, stands before the closed royal doors and begins reading this prayer. The altar always signifies the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom is closed to us because of our sins. But out of it came the Son of God – our Lord Jesus Christ, Who put off His divine glory, in order to take upon Himself our human essence together with all its weaknesses, except for sin. “*Let this mind be in you, – writes Apostle Paul to the Philippians, – which was also in Christ Jesus: He made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, becoming like unto men, and becoming in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself, being obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*” (2:5-8). It is of this that we are reminded when the priest comes out of the altar without wearing his shining outer vestments. And just as Christ through His earthly life stood in front of the gates of paradise, praying for the salvation of mankind from the power of the devil and sin, so the priest, standing before the closed royal doors, prays for our salvation. And we, meanwhile, lamenting our sins, but with firm faith and hope in salvation, should in our mind and heart repeat after the priest the words of the prayer: **“O Lord and Master of my life!”**

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In our modern times, when human pride towers as high as the Tower of Babel, for contemporary

mankind these words appear totally unacceptable. What Lord? What Master? Man is the master of his own life! For this reason even the word “God” is often written with a small letter. Most kings have been overthrown, since no one must rule over us! We will build our own life! And mankind does not want to understand that if God is not the Master of our life, then no matter whom or what it worships – these will only be false idols no matter what their name – be it “Apollo,” “Humanity,” “Progress,” “Environment,” “New Age,” etc. Only through absolute faith in the absolute power of God over the universe will we be able to approach Him. Thus we stand in awe before the name of God as the name of Him Whom we acknowledge to be the Lord and Master of our entire life.

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But let us not stand before God with our heads held high in pride, but let us rather bow humbly before Him, our soul uttering the following words of the prayer: **“The spirit of idleness give not to me, Thy servant!”**

The ideal of modern mankind is to work as little as possible and to enjoy life as much as possible. Modern civilization has invented a multitude of amusements and pleasures which gratify our senses. And those people who are free from work often spend their life in idleness.

But work is a need of the human spirit which has been instilled into it by God. The Bible tells us that God placed our ancestors in Eden for them to cultivate it. Love of idleness is an illness of the spirit. But idleness is especially dangerous in the field of spiritual endeavor. The battle with our human frailties and passions requires an even greater effort than our earthly struggle for existence. In the latter there are intermissions: when a person reaches a desired goal he can rest for a while. But there can be no rest in the spiritual struggle. Our enemy the devil never stops fighting against us. As Apostle Peter says: *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour; resist him with steadfast faith”* (1 Peter 5:8-9).

When we go to bed at night without prayer, all the sins which we have committed during the day remain uncleansed. When we get up in the morning – we never have time to pray, since we must hurry off to work. And so the layer of sin covering our soul becomes thicker and thicker. The mind immerses itself in worldly vanity and ceases to think of what is most important – the salvation of the soul. We are too lazy to work for the salvation of our soul. But in the secular world we are prepared to work overtime if it brings us material gain. In such a case we do not even think of being tired! But to work on saving our soul, which, if it does not attain the Kingdom of God, will end up in the kingdom of Satan, – for this we are too tired, too lazy. And yet let us think a little bit about eternity. Time does not exist there, eternity stretches endlessly without change. Today, tomorrow, a hundred years, a thousand years hence, everything will remain the same. For the one who will blissfully dwell with God, this knowledge will bring comfort and joy. But what will be the feelings of those who will be with the devil?

Let us reject the spirit of idleness and let us earnestly embark upon the labor of spiritually cultivating our souls! An idle man, having nothing to do, becomes bored. Boredom leads to a feeling of dissatisfaction with life, at which point even amusements cease to help. This is because physical pleasures gratify only the sensual aspect of our being, but totally disregard the soul which has been created in the image of God. And it is through this soul that boredom begins to take hold of a person, often leading to despair, to hopelessness and despondency...

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At the first sign of despondency one must arm oneself against it by means of hard work, one must fight it off, asking God for help: **“The spirit of despondency give not to me, Thy servant.”**

Often this spirit of despondency takes hold of a person because of hidden pride, hidden envy: why are other people in a better situation than I? Why do others dominate while I have to obey? But such

a person forgets that not everyone is called upon to rule, not everyone is called upon to teach, while those who are – have more responsibilities than privileges. From those who are given more – more will be asked. Let us deprive the devil of the possibility of leading us into despondency. Let us cut off our pride and have faith in that the Lord Himself will lead us along the path on which we will most easily be able to reach the Heavenly Kingdom. Let us pray to the Lord: “***The spirit of ambition give not to me, Thy servant,***” and then we will find peace in our hearts.

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We criticize everything, we pass judgment on everything, we are discontent with everything. From morning to evening our tongues work ceaselessly, babbling all manner of vanity. Even in church we say the words of prayers only with our tongue, without grasping their meaning with our mind, without feeling them with our heart. And so it comes about that we are constantly talking idly. But all that we say will not vanish into eternity without a trace. If we speak of love, but in life seek revenge upon those who have offended us; if we speak of morality, but in life do not follow the commandments of the Gospel; if we speak of charity, but in life we humiliate others, – then at the Last Judgment we will be judged with our own words. If we speak of good, then we know about it; and if we know about it and do not do it, then we engage in idle talk. However, we will be called to account for each idle word. Idle talk is not only aimless chitchat, but it is also every word that has not been justified by life’s deeds. Therefore, even our prayers, uttered only with our tongue but not felt with the heart and not consciously grasped with the mind, – constitute idle talk.

Let us be attentive to our words, let us avoid saying things which can incite in us and in others evil or sinful thoughts and feelings. As St. John of the Ladder says: “Silence is always useful”; so let us humbly entreat the Lord: “***The spirit of idle talk give not to me, Thy servant.***” And let us seal our entreaty with a prostration, to show that we are aware of being guilty of all these sins, that we sincerely repent of them, and that we promise the Lord to make all possible effort to reform our lives.

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But just as nature abhors a vacuum, so in spiritual life one must not leave an empty space in one’s soul. Thus, if we cleanse our soul of passions, then we must fill it with virtues instead. Guided by the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian, let us ask of the Lord: “***The spirit of chastity bestow upon me, Thy servant!***”

What is chastity? In secular life this word is usually used in terms of carnal restraint. But the holy Church Fathers give it a much larger meaning, and that is: a general spiritual/moral discipline of a person. It is in this sense that the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian should be understood. In order to rid oneself of idleness, despondency, ambition and idle talk, – bodily purity is not enough. But if a person is able to restrain not only his carnal instincts but also desires of the heart; if he is able to direct his thoughts only toward good; if he curbs his tongue, does not speak malice of others, does not offend them, – such a person will truly be chaste.

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And without chastity it is impossible to achieve the next virtue for which we ask in the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian: humble-mindedness.

Humble-mindedness is an absolute prerequisite for man to be able to commune with God. Christ Himself has said to us: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*” The “poor in spirit” are those who do not see their own worth, but consider themselves to be lower than everyone else. And the parable of the publican and the Pharisee ends with the following words of Christ: “*For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted*” (Luke 18:14).

For us, proud sons of the twentieth century, all of this seems totally unacceptable. How?! We, who are armed with scientific knowledge, who have reached the level of molecular fission, who have broken the sound barrier in flight, – we must look upon ourselves as insignificant beings? Yes, if we want to enter the Kingdom of God. For one does not enter this Kingdom on the strength of scientific knowledge or inventions, but through the knowledge of virtues. Man may acquire knowledge of all the mysteries of nature and the entire universe, yet this will not lead him to salvation unless he kneels down and bows his head before the Lord, entreating Him from the bottom of his heart: ***“The spirit of humble-mindedness bestow upon me, Thy servant!”*** For all knowledge and all natural gifts come from God and are granted to people to be used in serving God and His Church.

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The spirit of humble-mindedness is also extremely important to us in waging spiritual warfare against the devil for the salvation of our souls. But aside from humble-mindedness we must also arm ourselves with patience. Should you fall – do not despair, arise, arm yourself and patiently continue your struggle. A monk once came to one of the elders and said: “Father, what should I do? – I have fallen.” “Arise!” – replied the elder. Some time later the same monk came and said: “Father, I have fallen again.” “Arise again,” – briefly replied the elder. The same monk came to him yet a third time with the same confession and received the same answer. “But, father, how long should I continue to arise?” – asked the monk. “As long as you keep falling,” – replied the elder. So lived the holy men. Let us follow their example, praying to God: ***“The spirit of patience bestow upon me, Thy servant!”***

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Chastity, humble-mindedness, patience and all other virtues form a wondrous bouquet in the human soul whose name is – love. God dwells in a soul that is filled with love, for ***“God is Love”*** (1 John 4:16). No matter how successful we are in our spiritual endeavors, no matter how many gifts we possess, if there is no love in our soul for those around us, then our endeavors are deficient. Apostle Paul writes in his epistle to the Corinthians: ***“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, – I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal”*** (13:1-3). Of the three main virtues – faith, hope and love, – love is the greatest. According to Abba Dorotheus, love is the roof of the house of virtues, which crowns the entire building and encompasses everything. Without a roof a house is incomplete and cannot be lived in. Without love all other virtues are imperfect, and God does not dwell in such a house. Thus, let us earnestly entreat God: ***“The spirit of love bestow upon me, Thy servant!”*** And let us again prostrate ourselves, in order to fortify our prayer to the Lord.

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But our prayer is not yet finished, and we continue with the following words: ***“Yea, o Lord King!”*** “Yea” is a sort of incantation, an attempt to beseech the Lord to grant us that without which our penitence will be fruitless, our prayer – invalid. What do we ask so forcefully of the Lord?

***“Grant me to see my failings!”*** Of what shall we repent if we do not see our sins? However, to be able to see them we must possess spiritual intelligence, spiritual discernment, in order to search within all the corners of our soul and renew our coarsened conscience. And if, by the grace of God, we are able to see our sins, to recognize them, then we will understand how much worse and heavier they are than the sins of those around us. And instead of passing judgment on our sinning neighbor, we will be able to look upon him with love and to pray for him. It is for this that we ask of the Lord: ***“Grant me not to condemn my brother!”*** And finally, with firm faith that we will receive all that we have asked, we bless the Lord: ***“For blessed art Thou unto the ages of ages. Amen!”*** Be it so, O Lord and Master! May our prayers and our faith be answered!

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