

St. Nilus (Neilos) the Ascetic on Prayer



"Prayer is the ascent of the mind towards God. It is a spiritual labour that befits the human mind more than any other preoccupation.

Prayer is born from meekness and the lack of anger that brings to the soul joy and pleasure; it protects man from sorrow and depression.

Just as bread is food for the body and virtue is food for the soul, so the food for the mind (nous) is spiritual prayer.

Just as vision is superior to all the other senses, so is prayer more divine and sacred than all virtues.

He who loves God, always converses with Him like son to father and is averse to every impassioned thought.

Since prayer is an association of the mind with God, then in what state must the mind possibly be, in order to be able, without turning elsewhere, to approach its Lord and converse with Him without the mediation of something else?

If Moses in his attempt to approach the burning bush was hindered until he had removed the sandals from his feet, then shouldn't you who desires to see God and converse with Him, remove and cast out of you every sinful thought?

The entire war between us and the unclean demons does not occur for any other reason but for spiritual prayer, because prayer is extremely hostile and obtrusive to them, whereas for us it is a cause for our salvation, enjoyable and pleasant.

What do demons seek to arouse inside us? Gluttony, prostitution, avarice, anger, resentment and all the other passions that fatten the mind so that it will be unable to pray properly; because when irrational passions prevail, they do not allow the mind to move logically.

Do not think that you have acquired virtue if you have not previously struggled for it, even unto blood. Because, according to the apostle Paul (Eph 6:11) we must resist sin to the death, with a fighting spirit and an irreproachable manner.

A bound person cannot run. Nor can the mind, which works like a slave for a certain passion, be able to offer a true prayer, because it is dragged around and wanders here and there on account of impassioned thoughts and cannot remain undisturbed.

You will not be able to pray clearly if you are preoccupied with material things and are agitated by incessant cares, because prayer implies riddance of every care.

If you wish to pray, you are in need of God, Who grants true prayer to whoever persists tirelessly in the struggle of prayer. Invoke Him therefore by saying: "Blessed be Thy Name, Thy Kingdom come" (Matt 6:9); in other words, may the Holy Spirit and Your only begotten Son come, because this is what Christ taught us, when telling us that we must adore and worship God the Father "with the power of the Spirit, Who reveals the Truth" (John 4:24).

First of all, pray to acquire tears, in order to soften with mourning the savageness of your soul. You will then easily confess with honesty before the Lord all the sins that you have committed and you shall receive forgiveness from Him.

Use your tears to succeed in every request of yours. For the Lord is greatly pleased when you pray with tears.

If during your prayer you shed fountains of tears, do not pride yourself that you are above many others. This is not your accomplishment; it is assistance for your prayer from the Lord, so that you will be able to thus confess your sins willingly and appease Him.

When you believe that you do not need tears in your prayer for your sins, consider how far you have drifted away from God, when "you should constantly be near Him" and then you will weep more fervently.

Indeed, if you have an awareness of your condition, you will mourn gladly, deploring yourself and saying like the prophet Isaiah "How is it that while I am unclean and full of passions, I dare to appear before the Almighty Lord? (Isaiah 6:5).

If you wish to pray in praiseworthy way, deny yourself at every moment; and if you suffer many hardships, reflect on the relief you will find when you take refuge in prayer.

If you long to pray as you should, do not sorrow any person. Otherwise your prayer is futile.

Whatever you do against your brother who has wronged you, will all become obstacles during your prayer.

"Leave your offering" says Christ, "in front of the altar and go first and be reconciled with your brother and then come to pray without any agitation" (Matt 5:24), because resentment dulls the logic of man who prays and darkens his prayers.

Those who pray but accumulate sorrows and grudges inside them are likened to people who draw water from the well and empty it into a leaking container.

Do not be fond of chattering and human glory. Otherwise, the demons will conspire against you, not behind your back, but in front of your very eyes and they will rejoice with you during prayer time, as they will easily distract you and entice you with uncanny thoughts.

If you wish to pray clearly, do not give in to any carnal demands and you will not have any cloud overshadowing you during prayer.

Do not avoid poverty and sorrow, because they make prayer seem lighter.

Be careful! Are you truly standing before God during the time of prayer, or are you perhaps conquered by human praise and you seek it, by saying many and lengthy prayers?

Do not pray like the Pharisee but rather like the tax collector, so that you too may be vindicated by the Lord.

The praiseworthiness of prayer does not lie in its quantity but its quality. This becomes apparent in

the parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee and the words of Christ: "When you pray, do not ramble like the idolaters; for they think that with their chatter they will be hearkened" (Matt 6:7).

Do not pray only with external gestures; instead exhort your mind to be aware of the task of prayer with immense fear.

Whether praying alone or together with your brothers, struggle to pray, not out of habit but with awareness.

Awareness of prayer means the gathering of the mind (Nous) with piety, with devout concentration, with secret sighs and the soul's pain that accompanies the confession of our sins.

You should remain standing and endure the exertion, praying with intensity and perseverance and scorn the cares and the thoughts that come to you. For they agitate and upset you, in order to paralyze your strength and intensity.

If you are patient, you will always pray with joy.

Strive to keep your mind deaf and mute during the hour of prayer. Only thus will you be able to pray.

Chanting quells the passions and pacifies the disorderly movements of your body. Therefore chant with awareness and seemliness and you will thus resemble an eaglet soaring high.

If you have not yet received the gift of prayer or chanting, ask for it persistently and you shall receive it.

The devil greatly envies the person who prays, and he uses every possible trick with the intent to hinder his purpose. Thus, when demons see that you are willing to pray sincerely, they will intentionally remind you of certain supposedly necessary things. Soon after, however, they make you forget them, then they force you to look for them. And because you do not remember them, you become worried and sad. When you resume your prayer, they again remind you of the things you were looking for, so that your mind turns back to those things again, and eventually lose that fruitful prayer.

During prayer, your memory will bring you either fantasies of past things or recent cares or the face of the one who had grieved you. Therefore, guard your memory well, so that it does not present you with its own cares. And continuously urge yourself to remain aware in Whose presence it is standing, because it is very natural for the mind to be easily carried away by memory during the time of prayer.

The attention paid by the mind that seeks prayer will find prayer, because prayer follows attention more than anything else. Let us therefore ensure that we willingly strive to acquire attention.

At times, by remaining standing during prayer, you can immediately concentrate and pray well; at other times, you may strive very hard, but not achieve your purpose. This occurs, so that you may ask for prayer with greater zeal; and after acquiring it, to have it as your inalienable achievement.

Know that the holy angels prompt us to pray and stand alongside us and rejoice and pray for us. If we therefore become negligent and accept the thoughts that the demons subject us to, we greatly

dismay the angels, because, while they strive so much for our sake, we do not want to beseech God - not even for our own sake; instead, by ignoring their services and abandoning their Lord and God, we converse with unclean demons.

A true prayer is said by the one who always offers his first thought as a sacrifice to God.

Do not pray for your desires to be realized, because they certainly do not agree with the will of God; but rather, as you were taught, say in your prayer: "Let Your Will be done" (Matt 6:10), and for every single thing, you should likewise ask God that His Will be done, because He wants whatever is best and beneficial for your soul.

I have often asked God through prayer for something I thought to be good. And I insisted illogically on asking for it, thus violating the divine will. I would not let God provide whatever He knew would be to my benefit. And so, having received what I had asked for, I afterwards felt very sorry that I had not asked that His Will be done, because things did not turn out as I had thought they would.

What is benevolent, if not God? Let us therefore entrust all our needs with Him and everything will go well, as the benevolent One definitely also bestows beneficial gifts.

In your prayer, ask only for the justice and the Kingdom of God - in other words, virtue and divine knowledge - and all the rest will then be added to you.

Entrust the needs of your body to God, and that will reveal to Him that you also entrust the needs of your spirit.

Strive in your prayer to never seek any evil to befall anyone, so that you do not destroy whatever you have built by making your prayer abhorrent.

Let the debtor of the ten thousand talents in the Gospel be an example to you. If you do not forgive the person who has harmed you, neither will you attain the absolution of your sins; because the Gospel says of the debtor of the ten thousand talents who did not forgive his debtor, that "he was delivered to his torturers" (Matt 18:24-35).

It is appropriate that you do not pray only for yourself, but also for every fellow-man, so that in this way, you will be emulating the angelic manner of praying.

Do not be sorrowed if you do not immediately receive from God that which you asked for, because He desires to benefit you even more, through your patient perseverance in prayer. What is there indeed more superior to associating with God and conversing with Him?

In wishing to teach His disciples that they must always pray and not be discouraged, the Lord narrated an appropriate parable (Luke 18:1-8). In this parable a certain unfair judge said the following about a widow who was persistently demanding to be vindicated: "Even if I neither fear God nor feel any shame before people, however, because this woman continuously bothers me and demands to be vindicated, I shall do so". And the Lord then concluded: "So also shall God soon fulfill the wish of those who beseech Him day and night". That is therefore why you should not be discouraged or worried because you did not receive it, because you will receive it later. Be happy and persist, enduring the toil of holy prayer.

Overlook the needs of the body when you pray, so that you do not lose the greater gain of your

prayer from the sting of a mosquito or the buzzing of a fly.

If you have diligence in prayer, be prepared for attacks by demons and endure their blows with bravery, because they shall charge at you like wild beasts, to torment you.

He who suffers sorrowful things, will also attain joyful ones. He who perseveres during unpleasant things, will also enjoy pleasant ones.

Do not imagine any form for God when you pray, or allow any shape to imprint itself in your mind; only approach in an incorporeal manner the incorporeal God.

Do not desire to see with your bodily eyes the angels or powers or Christ, in case you might lose your mind completely and thus accept a wolf instead of a shepherd and worship the demon enemies.

Guard yourself from the traps of the demons. For it happens that as you pray in peace and quiet, they may suddenly present you with a strange form, in order to lead you to pride, as you might suppose that it were the divine is. But the divine is incorporeal and without form.

Take care to have plenty of humility and bravery, and no demonic influence will touch your soul. The angels will invisibly drive away the entire influence of the demons.

When the cunning demon uses numerous means and cannot hinder the prayer of the righteous, he withdraws for a while. But then he revenges him later, by pushing him to anger, in order to disperse the exceptional inner state that was created through prayer, or by arousing him with carnal desires in order to pollute his soul.

When you pray the way you should, expect temptations. Stand therefore courageously, to preserve the fruit of your prayer. Because from the very beginning that is what you committed yourself to - working the prayer and guarding its fruits. (Gen 2:15). Having worked therefore, do not leave unguarded what you earned, otherwise you will not have benefited at all from your prayer.

If you pray in a God pleasing way, you will meet such trials, that you will think it is only fair that you become angry. However, no anger against your neighbour is justified. If you study the situation carefully, you will find that it is also possible to resolve the case without anger. Resort therefore to every means, so that you do not become angered.

By co-suffering with our ailment, the Holy Spirit comes to us even though we are unclean because of passions and sins. And if He finds the mind praying sincerely only to Him, He will prevail over him, scatter all the legions of evil thoughts and reflections that surround him and exhorts him towards the love of spiritual prayer.

Do you have a passion for praying? Make yourself dead to this earth. Always have Heaven as your homeland - not with words, but with an angelic life and divine knowledge. Forsake all things, so that you may inherit everything.

If you are a true theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a true theologian.

Blessed is the mind that during prayer does not form any shape whatsoever inside it. Blessed is the mind that prays without being distracted and continuously acquires an increased desire for God. Blessed is the mind which during the time of prayer becomes incorporeal and free from everything.

Blessed is the mind which during the time of prayer remains uninfluenced by anything.

If during prayer you feel greater joy than any other joy, then you have indeed found the true prayer."
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