



On Prayer

On Prayer

What is prayer?

Prayer is an ascension of the mind and the heart toward God, a contemplation of God, a creation's intrepid discourse with its Creator, a pious standing of the soul before Him, Who is the Giver of life; a neglect for His sake of all that surrounds us, food for the soul, its air and light, a life-giving warmth, a cleansing of sins, the easy yoke of Christ, His light burden.

Prayer is a constant feeling (awareness) of one's frailty or spiritual poverty, a sanctification of the soul, a foretaste of future rapture, angelic bliss, a heavenly rain which freshens, irrigates and fertilizes the soul, the power and might of the soul and body, a purification and cleansing of the mind, an enlightenment of the visage, a joyousness of the spirit, a golden thread which unites the creation with the Creator, courage and fortitude in all the sorrows and tribulations of life, the illumination of life, success in all affairs, a merit equal to that of the angels, an affirmation of faith, hope and charity.

Prayer is communion with the angels and all the God-pleasing saints.

Prayer is the rectification of life, the mother of the heart's tenderness and tears; a strong impetus towards charitable deeds; the surety of life; the destruction of mortal fear; the rejection of earthly treasures, the desire for heavenly bounties, the expectation of a universal judgment, a universal resurrection and eternal life; a fervent effort to be delivered from eternal punishment; a continuous desire to attain the Lord's mercy; a walk in the eyes of the Lord; a blessed entrusting of oneself to the omnipotent and all-fulfilling Creator; the living water of the soul.

Prayer is the encompassing of everyone in one's heart by means of love; a bringing down of heaven into the soul; an encompassing of the Most-holy Trinity in one's heart, as has been said: We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him (John 14:23).

*From the spiritual diary of St. John of Kronstadt,
"My life in Christ"*

* * *

Prayer is the hardest spiritual feat, and until the very last breath it is linked to a hard struggle. Nevertheless, by His charity the Lord from time to time gives comfort to the supplicant, so that the latter would not weaken. Each person must determine his own rule of home prayers, taking into account the time he has available; such an action would not be detrimental. But I advise you to eschew a lengthy collection of prayers, in order to avoid haste and becoming a slave to your rule.

The holy fathers called prayer the queen of virtues, for it attracts other virtues. But in view of its sublimity, it requires a correspondingly enormous effort.



During prayer one must keep oneself in absolute humility, and if warmth and tears should appear, one must not think highly of oneself; let them come and go without forcing them.

Schema-abbot John, elder of Valaam.

* * *

Concentration during prayer brings tranquility to the nerves and the bloodstream, helps the heart immerse itself in repentance and remain there.

Whoever wishes to unfold within himself a deep feeling of repentance, uses a brief prayer as the tool for attaining such a condition, saying the prayer with all possible attention and piety.

Endeavor to attain purity of prayer, together with a feeling of repentance and with tears, with a remembrance of death, of the Last Judgment. Such a prayer, linked to such remembrances, is the supreme divine wisdom.

The Jesus prayer tends to reveal the passions which are concealed and secretly borne in man's heart. The prayer both reveals and tames them. The Jesus prayer tends to reveal the captivity in which the fallen spirits hold us. The prayer reveals this captivity and liberates us. Consequently, we should not be upset and dismayed when passions arise from our fallen state or when they are incited by the evil spirits. And since passions are tamed by prayer, we should - whenever they arise within us - very quietly and unhurriedly engage our mind in saying the Jesus prayer, which little by little will tame the raging passions. Sometimes the arousal of passions and the attack of evil thoughts is so strong, that it elevates a person into a state of spiritual labour. This is a time of invisible martyrdom. We must then confess the Lord before the passions and the demons with a lengthy prayer, which will bring a certain victory.

Bishop Ignaty Bryanchaninov.

Saint John of Kronstadt on prayer.

*Brief excerpts from the journal of St. John of Kronstadt
"My Life in Christ"*



St. John of
Kronstadt.

"I languish, I die spiritually," - said St. John, - "when I do not serve in church for several days, and my soul and heart revive, are aflame when I serve, immersing myself in a prayer that is not formal, but genuine, spiritual, sincere, fiery. I love to pray in God's church, in the holy altar, before the altar table, because by the grace of God I become wondrously transformed in church; in a prayer of penitence and humility my soul becomes free of the fetters of passion and I feel uplifted; I feel as though I am dead to the world and all its goods; I come alive in God and for God, for the one God, I become suffused by Him and am one in spirit with Him; I become like a child comforted in his mother's lap; my heart becomes full of divine sweet peace; my soul becomes enlightened with a divine light, everything is seen in this light, everyone is approached in the right way, one feels kindness and love towards everyone, even towards one's enemies, and they are easily excused and forgiven!"

O, how exalted is the soul when it is with God! The Church is truly a paradise on earth! How fervently one appeals to the Lord and the Mother of God! What meekness, humility, kindness one feels! What indifference to earthly things! What ardent desire for heavenly bliss! The tongue cannot even describe the rapture one experiences in having God within one's heart! With Him all earthly things are like dust and decay."

"One must constrain oneself and do prostrations even against one's will; this is necessary to combat the pride which nestles deep within our heart. Pride cannot bear to prostrate itself."

"A prayer requires that the object of the prayer be expressed concretely or, at the least, that the heart have a clear realization and desire of it; secondly, that this desire be expressed with feeling and a sincere belief in the mercy of the Lord and the Mother of God; thirdly, one must have a firm intention not to sin, but to fulfill the will of God in everything."

"If you are united to God by lively faith and virtue, especially meekness, humility and mercy, ask Him whatever you wish, whatever the Holy Spirit instructs you to ask, - and you shall receive: either immediately, in an instant, in a single hour, or after a while, in accordance with God's wisdom."

"If during prayer you start doubting the possibility of your request being fulfilled, remember that on God's part it is possible to give you everything, except for direct evil, which is characteristic only of the devil; that your very word or very request is already a realization on your part that the fulfillment of your request is possible; for if I can think of something, then fulfilling this "something" is undoubtedly possible for the Lord, for Whom the thought is already deed. To the possibility of fulfilling everything one should add His boundless benevolence, through which He is the Source of being and all the gifts of being. To this one must add God's wisdom, which in giving to us knows how to choose the gift that is best for us, that accords with our spiritual and physical state. The only thing required on your part is a firm and indubitable certainty in the Lord's fulfillment of your request, and that your request be for good things, never the opposite."

"People who rarely pray have a weak heart; when they want to pray, their heart weakens, and their hands, body and thoughts weaken, and it is hard for them to pray. One must overcome this weakness: try to pray with one's whole heart, because it is good and easy to pray whole-heartedly."

"The most important thing in a prayer, of which one must take care primarily, - is to have a lively and clear-eyed faith in the Lord: think of Him being in front of you and inside you, - and then, if you wish, ask the Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, and it shall be granted you. Ask simply, without any hesitation, - and your God will be everything for you, doing great and wondrous deeds in an instant."

* * *

Many people pray falsely, and such a prayer has become a habit with them; they do not notice and do not even wish to notice that their prayer is hypocritical, so that if someone were to accuse them of hypocrisy, they would become enraged with the person who, in their opinion, had dared to utter such an absurdity. A person does not reach the state of hypocrisy all at once, but very gradually.

At first, perhaps, he prayed with all his heart, but later, - since to pray with all one's heart constitutes a considerable effort to which one must always force oneself, for *the heavenly realm*, it is said, *must be taken by force*, - he begins to pray superficially, only with his lips and not from the depth of his heart, because it is so much easier; and finally, overcome by the battle of the flesh and the devil, he prays only with his lips, without instilling the power of the words of the prayer into his heart. There are many such people. The Lord says of them: *This people draweth nigh unto Me with*

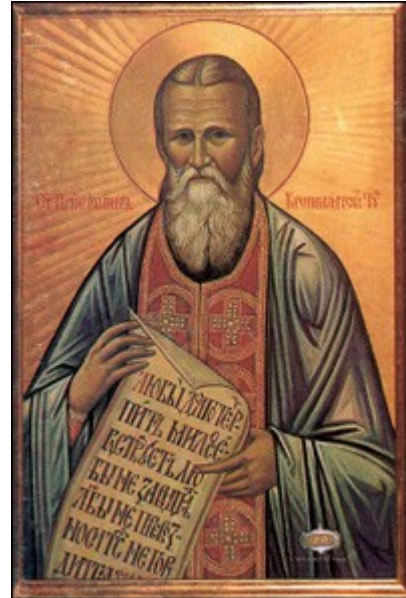
their mouth, and honoureth Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me (Matt. 15:8). May the Lord save us from such a prayer! The same happens with the sacrament of confession.

*From the spiritual diary of St. John of Kronstadt,
“My life in Christ.”*

* * *

- With what attentiveness, what reverence, what love, peace, and gratitude we must always say the name of God, and the Lord’s prayer, and all other prayers. The name of God is great, holy, terrible, and only to speak it fills every believer with bliss...

- The evil one tries to demolish our prayer like a sand castle; he wants to make our words be like dry sand without any moisture, i.e. without warmth of heart. Our prayer can either be like a house built on sand or like a house built on stone. Foundations of sand are used by those who pray without faith, absent-mindedly, coldly – such prayer disintegrates of its own accord and brings no benefit to the supplicant. Stone foundations are used by those who keep their minds and hearts directed toward God throughout the entire prayer, and who pray to Him as to a living Being Who converses with them face to face...



St. John of Kronstadt

- Sometimes during a long prayer only a few minutes are pleasing to God, and these few minutes constitute true prayer and true service to God. The most important thing in prayer is the closeness of the heart to God, which is felt by the indescribable sweetness of God’s presence in our soul...

- Each one of us would like our nearest and dearest not to forget us after we depart from this life and to pray for us. In order for this to come to pass, we, too, must love our departed ones. “Whatever you measure out to others, so will it be measured out to you,” – says the word of God. Therefore, whoever commemorates the departed, will himself be commemorated by God and men after departing from this world...

- Elder Siluan on prayer: “If our prayers are not answered immediately, it means that God does not want that to happen to us which we want, but that which He wants. In this case He wishes and is preparing for us something infinitely better than what we are asking from Him in our prayer. Therefore, we must end each prayer by humbly saying: **Thy will be done.**”

*From the spiritual diary of St. John of Kronstadt,
“My life in Christ.”*

Archbishop John of San Francisco on prayer.

Many people pray... They appeal to God at different moments in their life, not only under the stress

of difficult times, but also in times of joy, from a surfeit of bright emotions. Often they pray to Him at the beginning of an endeavor; more rarely - at the end of it. They pray spontaneously, reaching out to their Creator in a burst of thanksgiving or repentance. They pray methodically, in the morning and at night. They pray for a greater length of time in church.

The words with which man appeals to God are varied; the nuances of feeling are numerous; the strength of aspiration differs; the depth of faith is unequal... And yet, all mankind is united by that great force - terrible in its power of responsibility - the force of prayer: it unites all ages and generations, all the splinters of our fallen and shattered mankind, - people of different nationalities, persuasions, ideas, situations. If the world has still not fallen apart, still stands and keeps man upon it, it is because from all the corners of the earth, from all its mountains and all its abysses there arises prayer to God, a sigh of His creation.

What is prayer? It is **a conversation with God**. People experience great happiness and remember for the rest of their lives the occasions upon which they have had the chance to talk to some prominent personality, of high estate or great talent, a person of world renown. How much more, it would seem, should people appreciate the opportunity to converse with the One Who has created all prominence and renown in the world. What a shiver of joy, it would seem, should be caused by the realization of being able to have direct contact with the one and only Master of heaven and earth... But people continue to have such slight and indifferent awareness of God's nearness.

What is usually valued in prayer? People value the opportunity to ask for something from the Master of all creation. They ask to be delivered from illness, tribulation, danger, death - for themselves or their nearest and dearest. They value the possibility of obtaining a concrete bounty that is recognized by the world - so-called happiness: a tranquil family, a close friend, good children, a fortunate situation, a nice job, health, success in some affair or other.

But it is not only earthly needs that attract man to God. Many people realize that all material things must be firmly placed in God's hands, and one should not be too concerned with them. Everything else "will be added," as the Lord said. And so, with this belief, many of the faithful seek and ask in prayer only for spiritual treasures: for prayer itself, for patience, love, humility, meekness, faith, purity, truth. They ask to learn and hear God's will and, having heard it, to fulfill it. Afterwards, knowing God's will, they ask for strength to give themselves over to this will.

Most worthy of commendation is a lofty, non-material aim of prayer, especially prayers for others. But even when people approach prayer like children, asking for their simple material needs, they will receive the fruit of their prayers, although it may often differ from their request.

The highest prayer is that in which a person forgets all his needs, even the loftiest ones, burning with a single desire - to get as close as possible to the Lord, to place himself at His feet, to give Him all his heart. This is sublime love and sublime prayer, when one wishes to live only in the Lord, to love Him, to hide in His nearness, to be filled with His indescribable love.

A search for prayer **solely for the sake of prayer** can uplift all human appeals to God, can inspire each prayer. The earthly need for it is only of secondary importance. The heart of prayer is joy - to speak, to communicate, to pour out all one's anxieties, all one's doubts, all one's joys - to the One and Only, All-loving, All-knowing and Wise Father.

A child's prattle is pleasing to Him. The Lord accepts all human appeals, no matter how small or insignificant, if a person's heart becomes filled with joy and awe as it stands before the Master. All that is small becomes great in the process of being presented to the Lord. All that is imperfect becomes perfect.

Do not be embarrassed by the magnitude or insignificance of your entreaties, but seek, first of all, not that for which you are asking, but the One Whom you are asking. Only those appeals are unworthy, which love the Lord less than the thing or matter which is being requested. If you love the Lord above all, then all your appeals shall be blessed, both great and small, and all your requests

shall be fulfilled; and the one which, by the will of God, is not fulfilled, will bring you greater benefit than the one which is fulfilled.. And always there remains in our hearts the great fruit of prayer, - we ascend into heaven, to the Creator of lights, and the divine spark of the grace of the Seraphim fills our hearts...

Archbishop John of San Francisco.

Archimandrite Kronid on prayer

If the heart has cooled toward prayer, and day after day a Christian remains without it, failing to feel it as an essential need, then one must immediately forsake this path and begin a life of regular prayer. There will be some difficulty in over-coming the indolence of the soul. But that is only in the beginning. The main thing is to be firmly decided upon constant prayer. The Lord is a quick helper to each Christian in any good endeavor, and in prayer also. No matter how much the devil tries to subordinate the Christian's will, distract him from prayer, one must withstand this attack in spiritual combat with the evil spirit. It is very important to understand first of all that indolence towards prayer is an unnatural condition in the spiritual life of a Christian. Everyone who prays earnestly can testify to the fact that there is no more desirable activity than prayer, and that nothing gives a person's soul so much sweetness and joy as prayer. It is only to someone who is personally unfamiliar with prayer that prayer may seem a boring, monotonous and lifeless activity. But whoever prays with a sincere, God-pleasing prayer – constantly feels in his soul an extraordinary light, warmth and joy. How many of the best spiritual laborers of Christ's Church dedicated their entire life to constant prayer! And with what grace-filled light they shone to the world, what spiritual warmth they radiated around them!

A Christian must begin each activity with prayer, proceed in it with prayer, and end it with prayer. Those who do so avoid many difficulties, worries, anxieties, disappointments. All their work is done successfully, because they are invisibly aided by the Lord.

Prayer should be joined to firm and unshakeable faith in that the Lord will grant our request, if the latter serves for our good and for our salvation. Many of the faithful appeal to God in prayer only to ask Him for some earthly boon. Such people have not yet reached a spiritual condition wherein the soul breathes with prayer.

If your soul has been so given over to sinful pleasures or to worldly concerns that you do not have the spiritual strength to engage in earnest prayer, you should greatly sorrow over such a condition and ask God to grant you the necessary strength of prayer.

During prayer a Christian is especially subject to invisible attacks from the evil spirits, who try to influence the person's will, in order to distract him from prayer. In this mysterious and to our mind incomprehensible combat with the world of the fallen angels we must be spiritually valiant and always try to come out victorious.

Archimandrite Kronid

“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!”**

* * *

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.

* * *

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...

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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!***”

* * *

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.

* * *

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!

Reprinted in abridged form from “Orthodox Russia,” No. 5, 1997

On inner prayer

The purpose of prayer is to unite man with God, to bring Christ into man’s heart. Wherever prayer

is active, there Christ abides with the Father and the Holy Spirit – the one-in-essence and indivisible Holy Trinity. Where you find Christ – the Light of the world – there you find eternal light for the world, there you find peace and joy, the angels and the saints, the bliss of the Heavenly Kingdom.

Blessed are those who have clothed themselves in the Light of the world – in Christ – still in this present life, because they have already begun to wear incorruptible garments.

Thus, inner prayer is aimed at bringing Christ into man's heart, ridding it of the evil spirit and destroying all his deeds, which have been committed through sin. It is for this reason that the Son of God has come, in order to destroy the deeds of the devil, – says the beloved Disciple. Wherever the devil becomes aware of the power of inner prayer, there he opposes it with frenzied fury, battles against this prayer.

Many times the demons, from out of the mouths of those possessed, confessed to being burned by the effect of this prayer. There was a certain monk who became so indolent that he left off his prayer rule and returned to the world. He went back to his native land in Cephalinia, where people possessed by demons come to Saint Gerasimus to be healed. This monk also went to venerate the saint, and on the way he met a possessed woman who cried out: "Do you know what you are holding in your hands? O wretched man, if only you knew what you have in your hand! If only you knew how your rosary burns me. And you are holding it only from habit, as a custom!" The monk was dumbfounded. God's providence made the demon speak out thus. The monk came to his senses. God enlightened him, and he said to himself: "What am I doing! I am holding a mighty weapon in my hand, and I have been unable to vanquish the devil. And not only have I been unable to vanquish him, but he has taken me captive and is dragging me wherever he wants. I have sinned, O my God!" And in that same hour, having repented, he made a new beginning and so excelled in prayer and monastic life, that he became an instructive example for many. And to think only that the importance of prayer and the rosary was revealed – albeit quite unwillingly – by a demon, in accordance with the impenetrable will of the Almighty.

If Christ is the Light of the world, then those who do not see Him, who do not believe in Him, are undoubtedly blind. On the contrary, those who labor to fulfill His commandments, enter the light; they confess Christ and worship Him as God. Moreover, whoever confesses Christ and worships Him as the Lord and God, calling upon His name, receives also the power to do His will. But if he does not do so, then it is clear that such a one confesses Christ only superficially, while his heart is far away from Him...

The prayer is on your lips? Then grace will follow it. But besides the lips, the prayer should also pass into the mind, descend into the heart. This, however, requires a lot of time and effort

The difficulty of prayer lies in the beginning, as with all other good deeds. The tongue has to make a great effort, as recompense for all its idle talk and vanity. A habit has to be formed, for without effort and spiritual labor it is impossible to get into the habit of prayer. Humility is also required, in order to attract grace. Only then does the path open up before the spiritual laborer. The prayer is then united with breathing. The mind wakes up and follows the path of prayer. With time all passions calm down. Desires become restrained, the heart becomes tranquil.

Constantly rein in your mind, no matter how much it becomes distracted. Seeing your effort and your labor, God will send you His grace, to enable you to collect your mind. With grace everything is done joyously and effortlessly.

With prayer one goes from joy to joy. Without prayer – there is one fall after another, sorrow after sorrow, poor control over one's conscience. Spiritual fruits are attained slowly: some effort and abstinence together with prayer, some beneficial sorrow and tears, and then comes the sweetness of God's presence, the immaculate fear of God, which rectifies and cleanses the mind and the heart.

Be as temperate as possible in sleeping and eating, in order to be able to restrain also your tongue and eyes. And if you happen to eat or sleep in excess, then apply more effort in doing God's work.

Thus the demons will be frustrated, seeing that although they were successful in wounding you in one area, they were vanquished in another.

Be alert and act with sobriety. Not only effort is needed, but also sobriety, and the latter even more so, according to the Holy Fathers. The mind becomes quickly sullied, but is quickly cleansed. The heart is cleansed with great difficulty, but becomes sullied more slowly, being impeded by the grace of God residing in it. For this reason the heart must be cleansed, in order to help the mind become enlightened with the pure thoughts that are reflected in it from above.

Just as it is impossible for the one who walks at night not to stumble, so is it impossible for the one who has not yet seen the divine light not to sin...

Watch your imagination most attentively. Do not take in any external images. A wandering mind draws more and more grotesque images, trying to enter into a forbidden consciousness, trying to depict the hidden and private life of others. Prayer destroys such images as soon as they are created.

No one among mortals can remain uninvolved in the battle with the demons. Everyone experiences these enemy attacks, in order for the will to act and to freely make a choice. Greatly honored is the person who – by the grace of God – acquires the ability to restrain the devil in the initial stage of temptation – the suggestion. (*According to the Holy Fathers' teaching on thoughts, suggestion is the first stage in the development of a thought, when the devil presents a tempting image to a person's imagination. This stage is not yet considered to be a sin.*) Do not wish to unite yourself with those who, while living in a state of captivity, do not agree and say: 'But I can no longer withstand it – at this moment I cannot do anything.' Yes, at this moment you cannot, but you could have done so before, just as you will be able to do so again if you make a new beginning.

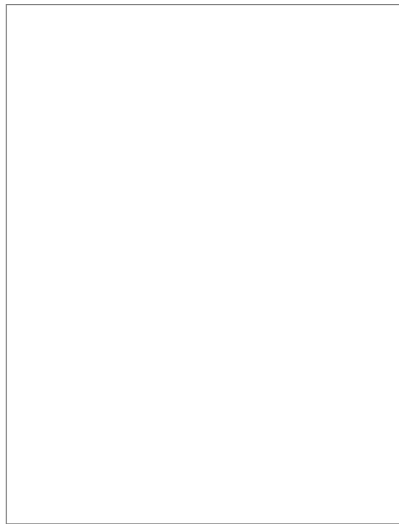
It is not unrepentant sinners who enter the Heavenly Kingdom, but the sinners who have been cleansed through penitence. Nothing helps a person as much in his spiritual warfare, in his triumph over passions, as constant inner prayer. In the midst of temptations, when the mind and the tongue flag, do not leave off your praying. Try just a little bit more, so that God sees your good intention and fortifies you. The Lord wants even greater things from you, and for this reason leaves you in temptation for a while, in order for you to attain these greater things which He knows you can do. And you know it, too.

From time to time you may receive grace without any effort on your part, as though the Lord were saying to you: All that you have is good, but do not think that it all depends on you alone. I am the One to judge when to come and when to leave, and in this way I will teach you patience and rejection of your own will, so that you will learn the lesson of humility well.

Attention should be united with prayer and remain inseparable from it, just as the body is inseparably united with the soul. The mind should guard the heart while it prays, and should pray to God from within the heart, saying constantly: O Lord Jesus Christ, save me! And then, when the mind, being within the heart, gets a taste of how good is the Lord, and delights in it, afterwards it will never wish to leave its place within the heart.

God is light, and the contemplation of Him is also Light. Fortunate are those who have approached the Divine Light, who have entered It, who have united with It, and who have themselves become part of this Light, because they have completely taken off the soiled garments of their sins and no longer wish to shed bitter tears. Fortunate are those who have come to know the Light of the Lord while still living on earth, as though they have already seen Him in person, and thus they have hopes of also standing before Him in the eternal life. Fortunate are those who have accepted Christ, Who has appeared as Light to those who have been in darkness up to now, for they have become sons of Light and the unending day...

Archimandrite Ephraim the Athonite



An Example of True Prayer

Homily for the Sunday of the Blind Man

The Gospel reading about the blind man, dear brethren, reveals to us how to worship God, how to pray to Him.

Passing among people, Christ saw a man who was blind from birth. Being blind from birth, this man had never seen anyone. He had no notion of human form. Even Christ he had never seen. He only **knew** that Christ was passing nearby, that He was a miracle-worker and that He could give him his sight. So he started crying out, calling for Christ. The people around him tried to silence him, because he was disturbing them, preventing them from hearing Christ's sermon, because he was disturbing the peace. Christ walked on, surrounded by His disciples. And they asked Him: "Master! Who sinned – this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered: "Neither this man sinned, nor his parents, but this was given so that the works of God should be manifest in him." Having said that, He spat on the ground, made clay of the spittle and anointed the eyes of the blind man with this clay, saying to him: "Go and wash in the pool of Siloam."

Let us imagine the state of this blind man. He is crying out, calling out... He is being pushed around perhaps, he is being silenced, but he continues to cry out, to call out... in other words, he is praying. Finally, the unseen Miracle-worker approaches him. But He does not perform an instant miracle. Quite the contrary. He does something that in human terms could be considered humiliating, unpleasant. He spits on the ground and makes clay out of the spittle and soil, and then anoints the eyes of the blind man with it. And if that were not enough, He sends him with this clay on his eyes to wash his face in the pool of Siloam. But the blind man does not protest; he goes off gropingly, stumbling, subject to the ridicule of passersby. Finally he reaches the pool and washes his face. And then, having done everything that was required of him, having suffered through everything, he finally regains his sight and comes back seeing.

Here is a wonderful example for us of prayer, dear brethren. We too are spiritually blind and unable to see the Lord. But we know that He is there. So let us call out to Him, cry out to Him, asking Him for help. And let us not feel dejected if we do not receive help instantly. Perhaps we must still travel a long way, down a difficult road, as was the blind man's road to the pool of Siloam. Along this way we might meet with troubles, humiliations, such as the clay represented for the blind man. Let us endure everything. Let us be patient and obedient. Let us do whatever the Lord wills, let us follow the way that He indicates to us, just as the blind man was told to go to the pool of Siloam. And

when we do all that is required, then the Lord will respond to our prayer and will answer it, if such is His will. And the same thing will happen to us as happened to the blind man. When through the circumstances of our life the Lord asks us: do you believe in the Son of God? – we will answer: we believe, o Lord! – and we will worship Him.

But when we pray we should avoid imagining anything, we should pray with a blank mind like the blind man, just **knowing** that the Lord is near, that He can do everything. And if for some reason things should happen contrary to our prayer – let us not lose spirit, but let us hope, let us hope even against all hope. And the Lord will do what is needful for us. So let us take on the state of the blind man, which is the best example of prayer.

Christ is risen!

*From the book of sermons by Archbishop Andrew,
“The One Thing Needful”*

.....

Source: http://www.holy-transfiguration.org/library_en/prayers.html