

## **On the Necessity of Constant Prayer for all Christians in General**

*by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain*

Let no one think, my Christian Brethren, that only persons in holy orders, or monks, are obliged to pray unceasingly and at all times, but not laymen. No, no! It is the duty of all us Christians to remain always in prayer. For see what His Beatitude the patriarch of Constantinople, Philotheus, writes in the life of St. Gregory of Salonica. That saint had a beloved friend, Job by name, a most simple man, but extremely virtuous. Once, talking with him, the prelate said of prayer that every Christian in general ought always to labor in prayer, and to pray unceasingly, as is commanded by the Apostle Paul to all Christians in general: Pray without ceasing (I Thes. 5:17); and as the Prophet David says of himself, regardless of his being a king and having the care of all his kingdom: I behold the Lord always before me (Ps. 15:8), meaning I always mentally see the Lord before me in my prayer. And Gregory the Theologian teaches all Christians and tells them that we should more often remember the name of God in prayer than inhale air.

Saying this and much else to his friend Job, the holy prelate added that in obedience to the commands of the saints, we not only should always pray ourselves, but we should teach all others to do the same, all people in general: monks and laymen, the wise and the simple, men, women, and children, and induce them to pray unceasingly.

Hearing this, it seemed to the elder Job a new stunt and he began to argue, saying to the saint that to pray unceasingly was only fit for ascetics and monks living outside the world and its vanities, but not for lay people who have so many cares and so much work. The saint brought in new testimonies in confirmation of that truth and new irrefutable proofs of it, but the elder Job was not convinced by them. Then St. Gregory, avoiding useless words and love of argument, was silent, and after that each went to his cell.

Later on, as Job was praying in his cell, there appeared to him an Angel sent from God, who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (Tim. 2:4), and rebuking him for having contradicted St. Gregory and opposed an obvious fact on which the salvation of Christians depends, he admonished him in the name of God to attend to himself in future and beware of saying to anyone anything in disparagement of that soul-saving work, thus opposing himself to the will of God, and that even in his mind he ought not to harbor a thought contrary to this and should not allow himself to think otherwise than St. Gregory had told him. Then the most simple elder Job at once hastened to St. Gregory and, falling at his feet, asked his forgiveness for contradicting him and for his love of dispute, and disclosed to him everything that had been said to him by the Angel of God.

Do you see, my brethren, that it is the duty of all Christians, small and great, always to practice the mental prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me! so that their mind and heart may acquire the habit of always uttering those holy words. Let this convince you how pleasing this is to God and what great good derives from it, since He, out of His infinite love for men, sent a heavenly Angel to tell us this, so that no one should have any doubt about it.

But what do laymen say? "We are burdened by worldly matters and cares; how is it possible for us to pray unceasingly?"

I reply to them that God has not commanded anything impossible for us, but only such things as we can do. Therefore, this can also be accomplished by everyone seeking the salvation of his soul. For if it were impossible it would be impossible for all lay people in general, then we should not find such a large number of persons who have achieved in the world this work of unceasing prayer duly. One of the representatives of a whole line of such people is the father of St. Gregory of Salonica, that amazing Constantine who, although he was leading a court-life, was called the father and teacher of the emperor Andronicus, and daily was occupied with state affairs, besides his household duties, having a large fortune and a troop of slaves, as well as a wife and children, nevertheless was constantly with God and so attached to unceasing mental prayer that he often forgot that the emperor or the courtiers were talking to him about imperial affairs and frequently asked about one and the same thing twice or even more. This disturbed the other courtiers who, not knowing the cause of it, rebuked him for forgetting a matter so quickly and worrying the emperor by his repeated questions. But the emperor, knowing the cause of it, defended him and said: "Constantine has his own thoughts which sometimes prevent him from paying full attention to our affairs."

There was also a great multitude of similar persons who, living in the world, were wholly devoted to mental prayer, as is testified in the historical records of them. Therefore, my Christian brethren, with St. Chrysostom I implore you for the sake of the salvation of your souls, do not neglect the work of such prayer. Imitate those of whom I have told you and follow them as far as possible. At first it may seem very difficult to you, but be assured, as from the face of Almighty God, that the very name of our Lord Jesus Christ, constantly invoked by you, will help you to overcome all difficulties and in course of time you will get accustomed to this work and will taste how sweet the name of the Lord is. Then you will know from experience that this work is not only not impossible and not difficult, but on the contrary, both possible and easy. That is why St. Paul, knowing better than we the great blessing that prayer brings to us, commanded us to pray unceasingly. He would not have bound us by such an obligation if it had been extremely difficult and impossible, knowing beforehand that in that case, by not being able to perform it, we should inevitably prove disobedient to him and transgressors of his commandment, and should thereby deserve condemnation and punishment. And this could not have been the intention of the apostle.

Besides, take also into consideration the means of prayer, how it is possible to pray unceasingly, namely by praying with the mind, and this we can always do if we want to. For even when we are sitting at some manual work, or what we walk, or take food, or drink, we can always pray with the mind and perform mental prayer, pleasing to God, true prayer. Let us work with our body and pray with our soul. Let our outward man perform his bodily labors and or inward man be consecrated to the service of God, and never slack up in that spiritual work of mental prayer, as the God-man Jesus also commands us, saying in the Holy gospel: But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father, which is in secret (Matt. 6:19). The closet of our soul is our body; our doors are our five senses. The soul enters into its closet when the mind does not wander to and fro among worldly matters and things, but remains within our heart. Our senses are closed and remain so when we do not allow them to cling to outward sensible things, and in this way our mind remains free from every worldly attachment and through secret mental prayer is united with God our Father.

And thy Father who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly, adds the Lord. God, knowing everything concealed, sees the mental prayer and rewards by manifest and great gifts. for that prayer too is a true and perfect prayer which fills the soul with divine grace and spiritual gifts, like myrrh which, the more tightly you stop the vessel, the more fragrant it makes that vessel. so too with prayer: the more closely you confine it within your heart, the more it abounds in Divine grace.

Blessed are those who practice that heavenly labor, for through it they conquer every temptation of the wicked demons as David conquered proud Goliath. By it are quenched the inordinate desires of the flesh, as the three youths quenched the flame of the furnace. By this work of mental prayer the passions are tamed, as Daniel tamed the wild beasts. By it, the dew of the Holy Spirit is drawn down into your heart, as Elias drew down rain on Mount Carmel. This mental prayer ascends to the very throne of God and is preserved in gold phials and, like a censer, wafts its fragrance before the Lord, as St. John the Theologian saw in Revelation: Four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps and golden vials full of odors, which are the prayers of saints (Rev. 5:8). This mental prayer is a light enlightening the soul of man and inflaming his heart with the fire of love for God. It is a chain uniting God to man, and man to God. O, incomparable grace of mental prayer! It puts man into the position of a constant converser with God. O, truly wonderful and most wonderful work! Bodily you have dealings with men and mentally you converse with God.

The Angels have no sensible voice, but mentally they offer constant adoration to God. In this consists all their activity and to this their whole life is consecrated. So too you, brother, when you enter into your closet and shut the door, i.e. when your mind does not wander hither and thither, but enters into your heart, and your senses are confined and isolated from the things of this world, and thus you always pray, then you are like the holy Angles, and your Father, seeing your secret prayer, which you offer Him in the recess of your heart, will reward you openly with great spiritual gifts.

And what more do you wish when, as I said, you are mentally always before the face of God and constantly converse with Him — converse with God, without whom no man can be blessed, either here or in the other life.

And finally, my brother, whoever you may be, after taking this book in your hands and reading it through, if you wish to experience effectually the benefit which the soul derives from mental prayer, I pray you warmly not to forget when you begin to perform that prayer, by a single outcry: Lord, have mercy! to offer to God a petition for the sinful soul of him who worked a little on the composition of this book and of him who paid for the printing and publishing, for they are in great need of your prayer, so that they may obtain the mercy of God for their souls, as you for yours.

Amen! Amen!