

Saint John Climacus On Prayer(Step 28)

Prayer is by nature a dialog and a union of man with God Its effect is to hold the world together. It achieves a reconciliation with God.

Prayer is the mother and daughter of tears. It is an expiation of sin, a bridge across temptation, a bulwark against affliction. It wipes out conflict, is the work of angels, and is the-nourishment of all bodiless beings. Prayer is future gladness, action without end, wellspring of virtues, source of grace, hidden progress, food of the soul, enlightenment of the mind, an axe against despair, hope demonstrated. sorrow done away with. It treasure of hermits, anger diminished. It is a mirror of progress, a demonstration of success, evidence of one's condition, the future revealed, a sign of glory. For the man who really prays it is the court, the judgment hall, the tribunal of the Lord—and this prior to the judgment that is to come.

Let us arise and pay heed to what that holy queen of the virtues cries out to us in a loud voice, saying: " 'Come to me, all of you who labor and are weighed down, and I will give you rest. Take upon yourselves my yoke, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matt: 11:28-29), and a balm for the blows that fall on you. 'For my yoke is easy' (ibid. 30) and is a remedy for great sins."

Those of us wishing to stand before our King and God and to speak with Him should not rush into this without some preparation, lest it should happen that—seeing us from afar without arms and without the dress appropriate to those who appear before the King—He should command His servants and His slaves to lay hold of us, to drive us out of His sight, to tear up our petitions and to throw them in our faces.

When you set out to appear before the Lord, let the garment of out be woven throughout with the thread of wrongs no longer remembered. Otherwise, prayer will be useless to you.

Pray, in all simplicity. The publican and the prodigal son were reconciled to God by a single utterance.

The attitude of prayer is the same for all, but there are many kinds of prayer and many different prayers. Some talk and deal with God as with a friend and master, lifting their praises and their requests to Him—not for themselves but for others. Some look for greater spiritual treasures and glory and for greater assurance in their prayers. Some beg to be freed entirely from their adversary. Some look for rank and others for relief from all their debts. Some seek freedom from gaol or for charges against them to be dropped.

But heartfelt thanksgiving should have first place in our book of prayer. Next should be confession and genuine contrition of soul. After that should come our request

to the universal King. This method of prayer is best, as one of the brothers was told by an angel of the Lord.

If you ever found yourself having to appear before a human judge, you may use that as an example of how to conduct yourself in prayer. Perhaps you have never stood before a judge nor witnessed a cross-examination. In that case, take your cue from the way patients appeal to surgeons prior to an operation or a cauterization.

In your prayers there is no need for high-flown words, for it is the simple and unsophisticated babblings of children that have more often won the heart of the Father in heaven.

Try not to talk excessively in your prayer, in case your mind is distracted by the search for words. One word from the publican sufficed to placate God, and a single utterance saved the thief. Talkative prayer frequently distracts the mind and deludes it, whereas brevity makes for concentration.

If it happens that, as you pray, some word evokes delight or remorse within you, linger over it; for at that moment our guardian angel is praying with us.

However pure you may be, do not be forward in your dealings with God. Approach Him rather in all humility, and you will be given still more boldness. And even if you have climbed the whole ladder of the virtues, pray still for the forgiveness of sins. Heed Paul's cry regarding sinners "of whom I am the first" (I Tim. 1:15).

Oil and salt are the condiments of food; chastity and tears give flight to prayer.

If you are clothed in gentleness and in freedom from anger, you will find it no trouble to free your mind from captivity.

Until we have acquired true prayer, we are like those who introduce children to walking.

Make the effort to raise up, or rather, to enclose your mind within the words of your prayer; and if, like a child, it gets tired and falters, raise it up again. The mind, after all, is naturally unstable, but the God Who can do everything can also give it firm endurance. Persevere in this, therefore, and do not grow weary; and He Who sets a boundary to the sea of the mind will come to you too during your prayer and will say, "Thus far you shall come, and no farther" (Job 38:11). Spirit cannot be bound, but where He is found everything yields to the Creator of spirit.

If you have ever seen the Sun, you will be able to converse with Him in an appropriate way. But if you have not, then how can you truly talk to Him?

The beginning of prayer is the expulsion of distractions from the very start by a single thought; the middle stages the concentration on what is being said or thought; its conclusion is rapture in the Lord.

Prayer brings one sort of joy to those living in community, and another to those praying in stillness. Elation is sometimes characteristic of the former, but humility is always to be found in the latter.

If you are careful to train your mind never to wander, it will stay by you even at mealtimes. But if you allow it to stray freely, then you will never have it beside you. "I would prefer to speak five words with my understanding" (1 Cor. 14:19) and so on, says the mighty practitioner of great and high prayer. But prayer of this sort is foreign to infant souls, and so because of our imperfection we need quantity as well as quality in the words of our prayer, the former making a way for the latter, in accordance with the saying about giving prayer to him who prays resolutely, albeit impurely and laboriously (cf. 1 Kings [1 Sam.] 2:9).

There is a difference between the tarnish of prayer, its disappearance, the robbery of it, and its defilement. Prayer is tarnished when we stand before God, our minds seething with irrelevancies. It disappears when we are led off into useless cares. It is robbed when our thoughts stray without our realization of the fact. And it is defiled when we are in any way under attack.

If we happen not to be alone at the time of prayer, let us form within ourselves the demeanor of someone who prays. But if the servants of praise are not sharing our company, we may openly put on the appearance of those at prayer. For among the weak, the mind often conforms to the body.

Total contrition is necessary for everyone, but particularly for those who have come to the King to obtain forgiveness of their sins. While we are still in prison, let us listen to him who told Peter to put on the garment of obedience, to shed his own wishes, and, having been stripped of them, to come close to the Lord in prayer, seeking only His will (cf. Acts 12:8). Then you will receive the God Who takes the helm of your soul and pilots you safely.

Rise from love of the world and, love of pleasure. Put care aside, strip your mind, -refuse your body. Prayer, after all, is a turning away from the world, visible and invisible. What have I in heaven? Nothing. What have I longed for on earth besides You? Nothing except simply to cling always to You in undistracted prayer. Wealth pleases some, glory others, possessions others, but what I want is to cling to God and to put the hopes of my dispassion in Him (cf. Ps. 72:25, 28).

Faith gives wings to prayer, and without it no one can fly upward to heaven.

Those of us who are swept by passion must ceaselessly pray to the Lord, for all the passionate have advanced from passion to dispassion.

Even if the judge has no fear of God, yet because a soul widowed from God by sin and by a fall disturbs Him, He will take revenge on the body, the soul's adversary, and on the spirits who declare war on her (cf. Luke 18:1-7).

Our good Redeemer, by speedily granting what is asked, draws to His love those who are grateful. But He keeps ungrateful souls praying a long time before Him, hungering and thirsting for what they want, since a badly trained dog rushes off as soon as it is given bread and leaves the giver behind.

After a long spell of prayer, do not say that nothing has been gained, for you have already achieved something. For, after all, what higher good is there than to cling to the Lord and to persevere in unceasing union with Him?

A convicted man does not fear his sentence as much as a zealous man the time of prayer. So if he is shrewd and sensible, he will remember this and will therefore be able to avoid reproach, anger, anxiety, concerns, affliction, satiety, temptation, and distractions.

Get ready for your set time of prayer by unceasing prayer in your soul. In this way, you will soon make progress. I have observed that those who were outstanding in obedience and who tried as far as possible to keep in mind the thought of God were in full control of their minds and wept copiously as soon as they stood in prayer, for holy obedience had prepared them for this.

One can be held back and distracted by the singing of psalms in a congregation. This does not happen when one is a solitary. However, despondency can assail the latter, while in the former situation the brethren can give help by their zeal.

War reveals the love of a soldier for his king, and the time and practice of prayer show up a monk's love for God. So your prayer shows where you stand. Indeed, theologians say that prayer is a monk's mirror.

Someone who is occupied with some task and continues with it at the hour of prayer is being fooled by the demons, for these thieves aim to steal one hour after another from us.

Do not refuse a request to pray for the soul of another, even when you yourself lack the gift of prayer. For often the very faith of the person making the request will evoke the saving contrition of the one who is to offer the prayer.

Do not become conceited when you have prayed for others and have been heard, for it is their faith which has been active and efficacious.

A child is examined each day without fail regarding what he has learned from his teacher. And it is reasonable to ask that there be a reckoning of each prayer we have undertaken, in order that we may have an idea of the power we have received from God. You should see to this. And when you have prayed soberly, you will soon have to cope with bouts of ill temper, something our enemies aim for.

Every virtuous act we do—and this is particularly true of prayer—should be done with great sensitivity. A soul prays with sensitivity when it has overcome anger.

Whatever is obtained as a result of long and persistent prayer will remain.

When a man has found the Lord, he no longer has to use words

when he is praying, for the Spirit Himself will intercede for him with groans that cannot be uttered (cf. Rom. 8:26).

Do not form sensory images during prayer, for distraction will certainly follow.

The confident expectation of gaining that for which one is begging will show up during prayer. Confidence is doubt absent. Confidence is proof of the uncertain.

If prayer is a matter of concern to you, then show yourself to be merciful. Monks will receive a hundredfold if they are merciful, and they will receive everything else in the life to come.

When fire comes to dwell in the heart it resurrects prayer; and after prayer has been revived and taken up into heaven, a descent of fire takes place into the upper chamber of the soul.

Some claim that prayer is better than the remembrance of death. But for my part, my praise goes out to the two natures in one person.

When a good horse is mounted, it warms up and quickens its pace. The singing of psalms is the pace and a determined mind is the horse. It scents the battle from afar, is ready for it, and dominates the scene.

It would be very wrong to snatch water from the mouth of a thirsty person. Worse, however, is the case of a soul that is praying with compunction and is snatched away from its task before it has completed its longed-for prayer.

Do not stop praying as long as, by God's grace, the fire and the water have not been exhausted, for it may happen that never again in your whole life will you have such a chance to ask for the forgiveness for your sins.

A man with a taste for prayer may defile his mind with one careless word, and then at prayer he will not get what he wants in the way he used to.

To keep a regular watch over the heart is one thing; to guard the heart by means of the mind is another for the mind is the ruler and high priest offering spiritual sacrifices to Christ. When heaven's holy fire lays hold of the former, it burns them because they still lack purification. This is what one of those endowed with the title of Theologian tells us. (Gregory of Nazianzus, cf. Or. 21, 2 (PG 35, 1084D)) But as for the latter, it enlightens them in proportion to the perfection they have achieved. It is one and the same fire that is called that which consumes (cf. Heb. 12:29) and that which illuminates (cf. John 1:9). Hence the reason why some emerge from prayer as from a blazing furnace and as though having been relieved of all material defilements. Others come forth as if they were resplendent with light and clothed in a garment of joy and of humility. But as for those who emerge without having experienced either of these effects, I would say that they have prayed in a bodily, not to say a Jewish, manner, and not spiritually.

A body changes in its activity as a result of contact with another body. How therefore could there be no change in someone who with innocent hands has touched the Body of God?

We may note that our all-good King, like some earthly monarch, sometimes distributes His gifts to His soldiers Himself, sometimes through a friend or a slave, and sometimes in a hidden way. But certainly it will be in accordance with the garment of humility worn by each of us.

A man stands before an earthly monarch. But he turns his face away and talks to the enemies of the king, and the king will be offended. In the same way, the Lord will be offended by someone who at prayer time turns away toward unclean thoughts. So if the dog keeps coming, drive him off with a stick and never give in to him, however much he may persist.

Ask with tears, seek with obedience, knock with patience. For so it goes that he "who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Matt. 7:8).

In your prayers be careful not to beg too much on behalf of the opposite sex, for the enemy may come at you from the unprotected side.

Do not insist on confessing your carnal acts in detail, since you might become a traitor to yourself.

The hour of prayer is no time for thinking over necessities, nor even spiritual tasks, because you may lose the better part (cf. Luke 10:42).

Hold on to the staff of prayer and you will not fall. And even a fall will not be fatal, since prayer is a devout coercion of God (cf. Luke 18:5).

The value of prayer can be guessed from the way the demons attack us during services in church, and its fruit may be inferred from the victory over the enemy. "By this I know You are on my side because the enemy will not come to gloat over me" (Ps. 40:12) in the hour of battle. "I cried out with all my heart," said the psalmist (Ps. 118:145). He is referring to body, soul, and spirit, and where the last two are gathered, God is in the midst of them (cf. Matt. 18:20).

We are not all the same, either in body or soul. Some profit from singing the psalms quickly, others from doing so slowly, the one fighting distraction, the others coping with ignorance.

If you are always in dialog with the King in regard to your enemies, take heart whenever they attack you. A long struggle will not be necessary for you, for they will soon give up of their own accord. These unholy beings are afraid that you may earn a crown as a result of your battle against them through prayer, and besides, when scourged by prayer they will run away as though from a fire.

Always be brave, and God will teach you your prayer.

You cannot learn to see just because someone tells you to do so. For that, you require your own natural power of sight. In the same way, you cannot discover from the teaching of others the beauty of prayer. Prayer has its own special teacher in God, who "teaches man knowledge" (Ps. 93:10). He grants the prayer of him who prays. And He blesses the years of the just.

From John Climacus: *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, Paulist Press, NJ, 1982, pp. 274-281