

“Just as it is impossible to fight battles without weapons, or to swim a great sea with clothes on, or to live without breathing, so without humility and the constant prayer to Christ it is impossible to master the art of inward spiritual warfare or to set about it and pursue it skillfully.”
Saint Hesychios

Jesus Prayer

The Jesus prayer is recognized in the Church as a very important form of prayer to help us progress in our spiritual maturity by coming closer to a unity with God. Some say it is the only prayer we need to learn. The prayer is very simple. It is said like this: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.* This prayer can be said by anyone at anytime. One does not even have to be literate to be able to invoke this prayer. Metropolitan Anthony Bloom¹ says,

*More than any other prayer, the Jesus Prayer aims at bringing us to stand in God's presence with no other thought but the miracle of our standing there and God with us, because in the use of the Jesus Prayer there is nothing and no one except God and us.*²

He says the Jesus Prayer, “*more than any other,*” helps us to be able to “*stand in God's presence.*” This means that it helps us to focus our mind exclusively on God with “*no other thought*” occupying our mind but the thought of God. At this moment when our mind is totally concentrated on God, we discover a very personal and direct relationship with Him. For this reason the practice of the Jesus Prayer is very important for our spiritual well being.

The Jesus Prayer brings concentration to the mind and helps detach it from its attraction to and domination by all the surrounding objects of the physical world gained through the senses. It brings us back to a unity with God that existed at the time of our creation when we were created in “Gods image.” It is about liberating the soul from the passions of the body so the mind can act out of God’s will to carry out His commandments of love.

We must recognize, however, that this prayer is incredibly difficult to practice even though it seems to be very simple. In its practice we learn to continually recite it so that it permeates our hearts and focuses our mind, predisposing us to follow God’s will instead of our own ego directed will. Its impact on us is incredibly powerful. It can transform us from a life as a habitual sinner and bring us closer to being a person who lives united with God’s energies capable of redirecting their will to act in congruence with God’s will.

In Our Lord’s Name

The prayer begins with the name of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ. In the book of *Acts* we are told, “*There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*”³ The power in the prayer comes from our proclaiming the Lord’s name. In its simple form we confess our faith in Jesus Christ as our God and Lord. Saint Theophan the Recluse⁴

¹ A much loved archbishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and author of excellent books on prayer: *Courage to Pray, Beginning to Pray, Living Prayer, School for Prayer* and others. (1914 - 2003)

² From "The Jesus Prayer" by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom

³ Acts 4:12

⁴ Saint Theophan the Recluse (1815–1894) is a well-known saint in the Russian Orthodox Church. Writings available in English are *The Spiritual Life and How to Be Attuned To It, The Path to Salvation: a Manual of Spiritual Transformation* and others.

emphasizes the importance of this prayer when he says, “*Only with the help of this prayer can the necessary order of the soul be firmly maintained...*”⁵ Here he powerfully says that this particular prayer is essential if we are to put our soul in charge, being fully directed at God. Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov⁶ says, “*By the power of the name of Jesus the mind is freed from doubt, indecision and hesitation, the will is strengthened and correctness is given to zeal and other properties of the soul.*”⁷ He is saying that as we engage in this prayer the mind is freed from its confusion caused by the attack of numerous thoughts that distract us from God. As the mind is tamed through our repeated repetition of this prayer, the mind is brought under control through God’s grace so that we can use our rational faculties to direct our bodies in an appropriate way allowing us to act in a manner that is consistent with the teaching of Jesus.

With Humility

The Jesus prayer is also a complete practice of humility. As we complete this prayer we cry out for God to “*Have mercy on us.*” Why? Because we recognize that we are sinners. This is important because the confession of our faith in Jesus is connected with our inability to be saved on our own accord. For our salvation we require faith in Christ and our humble awareness of our sinfulness. Saint Maximos points out that pride, the opposite of humility and the predominate sin of mankind, consists of two forms of ignorance. The first is the ignorance of the divine power and the second is the ignorance of human weakness. The humble person is one who has faith in the divine power and recognizes his weaknesses. Therefore, in the Jesus Prayer we confess the power of Christ as our Lord and God along with our weaknesses seeking His mercy for our sinfulness.⁸

Two Functions

The Jesus prayer is very powerful in its simplicity. But it is not a method of meditation or simply a method to discipline the mind. It is much more. It enables us to participate in the life of Christ. It allows us to call Him into our thoughts and feelings continually, to make Him a part of our minds and hearts in a living way. This prayer brings Christ into every aspect of our life. It is with us no matter where we are or what we are doing. It eventually becomes a living part of us and is continually repeated in our heart. Remember, its aim is union with Christ and not some kind of spiritual experience or peaceful state.

There are two functions of the Jesus Prayer. The first is worship with repentance like all prayer. In this regard it must be repeated with total sincerity. It must be coupled with an attitude of repentance coupled with humility. We must also have a feeling of awe when calling on God’s name, recognizing His perfect love and His awesome power. At the same time we must be fully aware of our limitations in being able to live the way He intended for us at our Creation. We know from the story of our creation in Genesis, He made us in His “image and likeness”. So we

⁵ St. Theophan, *Art of Prayer*, p 92

⁶ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov (1807-1867) is a saint in the Russian Orthodox Church. He wrote a large amount of material, mostly about the spiritual life and prayer. Only a small portion of his writing has been translated into English. Available in English are *The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism*. Translated by Arch. Lazarus. Holy Trinity Monastery, 1997. ISBN 0-88465-011-1 and *On the Prayer of Jesus*. Translated by Arch. Lazarus. Ibis Press, 2006. ISBN 0-89254-120-2

⁷ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*. p 25

⁸ Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*, p 44-45

have an incredible potential to live up to. If we honor this and recognize how far we miss the mark, we will approach Him with a contrite heart and along with a sincere desire to be helped and transformed so we can live up to this beautiful potential He gave to each of us.

The second purpose of this prayer is to help us concentrate our inner life, calming it, so we can focus our attention totally on God and his teachings. We may refer to this as a form of spiritual purification. If we study human behavior we know that our brain is very active and easily distracts our mind as it continually reacts to various stimulus through our five senses based on hidden assumptions programed in its inner workings. This is not all bad, because it is through these programed responses that we are able to survive in this physical world. Think of the infinite inputs that our brain continually receives. By its inner structure we are able to respond in ways that allow us to survive. But we are created as higher creatures than mere animals, and we need to make sure to control these instinctual responses and direct them appropriately according to God's direction. We should not try and eliminate them but transform them. In our brain there are an uncountable number of connections between the neurons⁹ that make up our brain. Based on our genetic program and our environmental conditioning, some of these connections are very firm. It is not easy to change them, let alone counteract the responses they imply. One thing the Jesus Prayer can help us with is reprogramming our brain and freeing us from animal like behavior, allowing our minds to regain control and focus on God's will for us. The repetition of this prayer is an ascetic discipline to help us focus the attention of our mind on God rather than on the endless stimulation of our senses and our biased orientation to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

Not a Form of Eastern Meditation

The practice of the Jesus Prayer is not the same as a far Eastern yoga, Hindu or Sufi practice. In Buddhism the use of a mantra¹⁰ that is constantly repeated is a common practice. One is "*Om mani padme hum*" which is important for its sounds and means "Jewel in the center of the Lotus." The aim of Buddhism is to free oneself from all suffering and attain what the Buddha called Nirvana or the perfect peace of mind. This peace of mind is achieved through various meditation techniques. The Buddha never taught about any form of God. Many practice this form of meditation to gain calmness in their lives. Sufism is a branch of Islam that also employs forms of meditation. Sufi scholars define Sufism as "a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else but God."¹¹ In meditation they aim to reach an awareness of their oneness with the universe, believing that in doing so we can attain fundamental truths that are within us, but often remain hidden. They do not believe that Jesus is God, but view Him as only a prophet. In Hinduism the chief aim is to gain release from the

⁹ Each of the 10¹¹ (one hundred billion) neurons has on average 7,000 synaptic connections to other neurons. It has been estimated that the brain of a three-year-old child has about 10¹⁵ synapses (1 quadrillion). This number declines with age, stabilizing by adulthood. Estimates vary for an adult, ranging from 10¹⁴ to 5 x 10¹⁴ synapses (0.1 to 0.5 quadrillion).

¹⁰ A mantra is a religious or mystical syllable or poem. They are primarily used as spiritual conduits, words or vibrations that instill one-pointed concentration in the devotee.

¹¹ Ahmed Zarruq, Zaineb Istrabadi, Hamza Yusuf Hanson - "The Principles of Sufism." Amal Press. 2008.

cycle of reincarnation caused by karma¹²--the consequences of past actions, in this or in previous lives! This is achieved through meditation techniques. This release leads to some kind of absolute Truth. Many of these approaches have been adapted by our modern culture to serve as means of relaxation or ways to lessen the stress of our over active lives. They form the basis of the "New Age" spiritual movement. They are taught without any specific aim of repentance, nor to do the will of God, or to seek union with Christ. In the practice of the Jesus Prayer with an attitude of repentance and humility we seek an encounter with the living Christian God, Jesus. We may gain benefits of relaxation or reduced stress, but this is not the aim of our effort. Union with God is.

A Gerondas¹³ from the Holy Mountain Athos¹⁴ enumerated the following points about the difference of the Jesus prayer from Yoga.¹⁵

1. The Jesus prayer expresses faith in God through His Son Jesus as part of a trinitarian God. It emphasizes that salvation is attained through God which is why we ask for His mercy. Salvation cannot be attained by our own efforts.
2. We are not attempting to find some impersonal God or absolute truth through the Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer focuses on a personal relationship with the God-Man Jesus.
3. We cannot fall into the sin of pride through the unceasing prayer of Jesus because in the prayer we continually seek mercy for our weaknesses. We consider ourselves unworthy of God's grace and recognize our sinfulness in His eyes.
4. Salvation is about union with God. In this union we do not eliminate our personality. The human factor is not denied as it is in some Eastern yoga practices. We are not assimilated in this union, but retain our personhood.
5. As we progress in the prayer we gain the ability to discern error. We learn the movements of the devil and enhance our ability to distinguish between good and evil.
6. The struggle in the practice of the Jesus Prayer is connected with the cleansing of our body and soul from the negative effect of passions. We do not seek apathy or to destroy our passions, but to transform them into help to seek a relationship with God. Our salvation depends on this struggle of transformation, which requires the help of God's grace.
7. We do not try and attain absolute nothingness, but seek to turn our heart so it brings the grace of God into our soul, so it can be spread throughout our body. We make no

¹² The concept of "action" or "deed" in Indian religions understood as that which causes the entire cycle of cause and effect. Through the law of karma, the effects of all deeds actively create past, present, and future experiences, thus making one responsible for one's own life, and the pain and joy it brings to him/her and others.

¹³ A priest or monk who has been healed by the grace of God and helps his spiritual children be healed.

¹⁴ Mount Athos (Greek: Ὄρος Ἁθῶς) is a mountain on the peninsula of the same name in Macedonia, of northern Greece, called in Greek Ἅγιον Ὄρος (Agion Oros, transliterated often as Hagion Oros), or in English, "Holy Mountain". This World Heritage Site is home to 20 Eastern Orthodox monasteries and forms a self-governed monastic state within the sovereignty of the Hellenic Republic. Spiritually, Mount Athos comes under the direct jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Only males are allowed entrance into Mount Athos. The 2001 Greek national census counted a population of 2,262 inhabitants.

¹⁵ Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*, pp 48 -50

effort to negate or destroy the body, but see it as the temple of the Spirit. We practice the prayer because we want to live with God eternally.

8. We are not indifferent to the world. We continually pray for all beings. Salvation is a union with Christ, while we are in communion with other persons. It is not an individual goal.
9. We do not put great emphasis on psychosomatic methods or on body postures. They can only assist us in concentration.

The difference from “New Age” practices or Eastern yoga meditation has been described by using the analogy of a framed masterpiece. We can admire the beautiful frame of a masterpiece, but the frame is not the masterpiece. The similarities between the Jesus Prayer and various meditation practices can be considered to be like the frame of a masterpiece. The masterpiece in the practice of the Jesus Prayer is union with Jesus Christ. The frame is only the methods used. There may be similarities with postures, techniques and other acts of the outer form of this prayer, but the content and aim is totally different and uniquely Christian.

A Long and Difficult Path

A struggle is required in the practice of the Jesus Prayer. Saint Maximos said, “*Spiritual knowledge without ascetic practices is the theology of the demons.*”¹⁶ To transform our being and free our mind from domination by passions, and to bring it into the heart to be aligned with God as its focus is not a simple task. Reflect on difficulty you encountered in developing other disciplines you have learned in your life, whether it relates to your work life, home life, or a sport. You will find that the same is even more true for your spiritual life. The practice of the Jesus Prayer requires a firm commitment, much effort and time. The practice of the Jesus Prayer must become a daily practice and engrained in your daily life. It is not something that you can allow yourself to ever say, “I am too busy today”, or “I feel too tired for prayer.” It must become just like other things you do without fail, like the simple act of brushing your teeth, taking a shower, and other such activities that are not treated as options in your life. If you skip it you should have the same unclean feeling as if you skipped your shower or brushing your teeth. This is how daily prayer needs to find its place in your life. It needs to become an integral part of your life.

We need to have caution about being over zealous in the beginning. When we start a new activity we are often overly enthusiastic and throw ourselves into it with great zeal. We start out thinking we are some kind of superstar of prayer making bold changes in our life. We think we can do anything with our own will power. But, when faced with difficulty, we very quickly fade and often do not finish the race. Our actions can be like the seeds referenced in Scripture that are sown on the hard ground that don’t germinate. We too often find what we started with such zeal is too difficult to master, and we become discouraged and drop out. Beware of this tendency and try to start with the realization that this is a difficult process. Make a commitment to enter into it with humility, seeking the help of God, and begin slowly so you can finish the race. Remember the story of the tortoise and the hare?¹⁷ You want to be the tortoise with a consistent and steady effort. The path is not easy and you will encounter difficulties.

¹⁶ Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*, p 61

¹⁷ The story concerns a hare who one day ridiculed a slow-moving tortoise. In response, the tortoise challenged his swift mocker to a race. The hare soon left the tortoise far behind and, confident of winning, he decided to take a nap midway through the course. When he awoke, however, he found that his competitor, crawling slowly but steadily, had already won the race.

As you repeat the prayer over many months you will find that it gradually, on its own accord, goes deeper and deeper into your consciousness and will begin to act on your soul. The Church Fathers counsel us to not be concerned about the difficulty we will encounter. They remind us that we are fighting against strong forces for our salvation. Gregory the Sinaite says, *"In the beginning there occurs unutterable contrition and unspeakable pain of the soul."* We should expect forces to work against us in this endeavor. We must recognize the nature of our brain and how it is programmed to keep things as they are. To live in union with God there must be changes made in our mental programming. This is not easily done. This is why we say the prayer has two functions. One is worship with repentance with humility and the other is to develop the capacity to focus our attention on the prayer and God. The Jesus prayer will lead us from earth to heaven and carry us to another world if we have patience and perseverance. Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov reminds us of the aim of the practice of this prayer. He says, *"Dwelling with the mind and heart in heaven and in God - this is the chief fruit or end of this prayer."*¹⁸

Three Stages of Prayer

There are three stages of prayer. The first level is oral prayer or as it is often referred to, prayer of the lips. This is the beginning stage where the prayer is said aloud. This engages more of our brain and helps us to focus our attention on the words of the prayer. Here we discover the nature of our distracted mind and programming of our brain. We encounter our own thoughts that will ride on top of the words our prayer like a hitchhiker. We will also have the sensation that we are more than our thoughts as we gradually begin to know our soul. We find that we can actually observe our thoughts interfering with our prayer. We wonder, "Where do these thoughts come from?" At this stage prayer is still something external to us so we need to consider this as a first step.

The second level is mental prayer. As we continue with prayer over a period of time we will find that we will be able to pray without using the lips and say the prayer silently in our mind. This will happen naturally. We don't want to force it prematurely. Don't try and be overzealous and end up like the hare instead of the tortoise. If we experience distraction at this level then simply go back to using oral prayer. Keeping our attention focused on the words of the prayer is essential. Theophan says that at this stage, *"the mind is focused upon the words"* of the Prayer, *"speaking them as if they were our own."* We begin to see how we can intercede and counteract our thoughts. We discover a new control center that we are beginning to see exists in our heart.

When you try and unite your mind with your heart the mind finds a hardness of the heart and cannot easily penetrate it. The mind will be frustrated and distracted by many other thoughts. As you begin to enter into mental prayer the words will be said in your mind and not your heart. This is where you need to expect to begin at this stage. Only later after much patience and effort will you be able to penetrate the heart. Try to keep your focus on the words as you pray and it will naturally open the door of your heart.

The third level is called prayer of the heart. At this level, prayer is no longer something you do, but something you are. This stage involves a transforming action as you discover your true nature. You find that you are much more than a body and brain, but that you are noetically

¹⁸ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*, p 35

connected with the divine energies of our God, and know that He dwells in the depths of your heart. This is not something you will be able to explain to others but you will recognize it. The prayer is now said continuously without any effort in the heart. This kind of prayer comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit. As Paul tells us, "*God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit that cries 'Abba, Father!'*".¹⁹ At this stage we now know what it means to be in union with God. We feel the divine presence within and sometimes are connected with the vision of the uncreated light, which is the pure energy of God. We can experience the kingdom of heaven within each of us. At this stage the door of our heart is wide open and we find our lives transformed as we begin to live a life of love. We now can pray "*without ceasing*"²⁰ as Scripture instructs us.

Practice of the Jesus Prayer

Anyone can use the Jesus prayer. It can be said at any time. To begin saying the prayer as part of our daily prayer rule we must follow the direction of Jesus. He says, "*Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest awhile*"²¹; "*Study to be quiet*"²²; then pray in secret—alone and in silence. Select a place where it will be quiet and you will not be disturbed. It is best if you can protect the senses from as much stimulation as possible. It is best to pray the Jesus Prayer early in the morning before sunrise when the mind is at rest and undistracted, the body is relaxed and there is little activity to disturb your concentration. Some may find the evening to work better.

Before you start think about who you are about to address. Make the sign of the cross and a few prostrations with the feeling of contrition and sorrow for your sinfulness. Select a comfortable position for prayer. Gently shut your eyes like the closing of tired eyes of a child falling to sleep.²³ Set aside all your worldly cares telling yourself you will have plenty of time for them after you pray. Relax your body.

After you have quieted yourself begin by praising God with *Glory to you...*, *Our Heavenly King Comforter...*, the Trisagion prayer, 51st Psalm, and the Creed. Then you can begin to say the Jesus Prayer out loud, loud enough so the ears can hear it, slowly and concentrating on the meaning of the words. "*The words of the prayer ought to be said without the least hurry, even lingering, so that the mind can lock itself into each word...*"²⁴

¹⁹ (Gal. 4:6)

²⁰ Eph 6:18 "With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit. To that end, be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones."

1 Thes 5:17 "Pray without ceasing."

1 Tim 2:8 "It is my wish then that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument."

Rom 12:12 "...be constant in prayer..."

1 Thes 2:13 "We constantly thank God for you."

1 Tim 1:2 "Always I remember you in my prayers."

²¹ (Mark 6:31)

²² (I Thess. 4: 11)

²³ Some Fathers recommend to keep the eyes open to avoid delusional images or lights from appearing.

²⁴ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov

Slowly say,

Lord Jesus Christ Son of God Have Mercy on Me a Sinner.

Try to keep your mind from escaping from its total concentration on the words. It will try just like a cornered or caged wild animal continually seeks to find a way out. The body is not accustomed to be under the control of the soul. When you reach the end of the prayer immediately begin to say it again. Make it like a continuous chain. The spacing of the words must fit your own make-up. Some will want to go very slow and others a little faster. The aim, with awe of God and contrition, is to concentrate your mind on the words and let them drop into your heart like drops of water slowly dripping from a leaky faucet.. Let the prayer resonate in your ears and in the area of your heart, savor each word with love, becoming totally absorbed in the words. You need to feel the words being absorbed within. Feel a contriteness in your heart because of your missing the make that God has set for you by creating you in His image. Feel the unconditional love of His unlimited mercy. If you go too fast you lose this feeling. If you go too slow you lose the content of the prayer. Say it slowly and deliberately. You do not want to rush as you are engaged in something important and potentially dangerous. You need to harness the wildness of your biological brain. Its like an automobile racing down the road at 80 miles per hour and is much more difficult to control than one cruising at twenty-five. Slow it down. Operate at the twenty-five miles per hour speed when you start - take it slow and deliberately finding the pace that best suits you so the prayer can penetrate the inner depths of your heart in silence.

Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov says, *“at first, the words should be pronounced with extreme unhurridness so that the mind may have time to enter the words as forms... One must train oneself to it as if one were reading syllables,”*²⁵ St. John of the Ladder counsels that the mind should be locked into the words of the prayer and should be forced back each time it departs from it.²⁶ Do not be disturbed if the words do not drop smoothly and are interrupted by thoughts, images, and feelings in the beginning. It takes some effort to tame the mind that is controlled by the brain. Eventually, the words will drop effortlessly into your heart. You need to focus intently and concentrate on the prayer.

Avoid any association with words of the prayer. Don't try to visualize the human person of Jesus or any other image. Don't try and take a diversionary path by letting your mind go into the life of Jesus or any theological questions. Don't reflect on the details of your sinfulness or try to solve any of your problems. Simply hold in your heart, with total humility, the awe of God and a feeling of contriteness. Keeping focused on the words of the prayer is very important because the mind can very quickly diverge from them to mundane day-to-day activities and when this happens you have lost your focus on God. If this happens, you are back in your own sea of worldly cares and distracted from your prayer. You will most assuredly be distracted this way during prayer. Concentrate on God who lives in the depths of your heart as Saint Theophan says,

“The essential part is to dwell in God, and this walking before God means that you live with the conviction ever before your consciousness that God is in you, as He is in everything: you live in the firm assurance that He sees all that is within you, knowing you better than you know yourself. This awareness of the eye of God looking at your

²⁵ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*, p 56

²⁶ (Step XXVIII, ch. 17)

inner being must not be accompanied by any visual concept, but must be confined to a simple conviction or feeling.”²⁷

You can expect to be bombarded with thoughts like a swarm of gnats. When your mind is distracted from the prayer by thoughts, and it will, be polite and gentle but firmly nudge your mind back to the concentration on the prayer and seeking God. When you recognize your mind is wandering do not let it continue on this path. Don't accept even good thoughts. Let your soul take charge and move your focus back to the words of the prayer. It is important to recognize when you are being distracted by thoughts which may occur at the same time as you are saying the prayer. They climb on top of your words and ride piggyback on them. If you don't intercede to bring your attention back to your prayer exclusively, you will not progress in your aim to come closer to God. When this happens your prayer is no longer sincere but only mechanical. Allow the Spirit working in your soul bring you back to the prayer and continue saying it with sincerity and feeling.

Saint John of the Ladder puts it this way,

Try to restore, or more exactly, to enclose your thought in the words of the prayer. If on account of its infancy, it wearies and wanders, lead it again. The mind is naturally unstable. But He Who orders all things can control it. If you acquire this practice and constantly retain it, He who sets the bounds of the sea of your mind will say to it during your prayer: Hitherto thou shalt come, and shalt go no further (Job 38:11). It is impossible to bind a spirit. But where the Creator of that spirit is present, there everything obeys Him.²⁸

When the devil sees us trying to pray, he works hard to distract us. He seeks out our weaknesses and generates all kinds of thoughts to distract us. Quite often the thoughts that come to us during prayer are related to our weaknesses, the areas where our passions have great influence in our lives. Outside of prayer we can use this information to confront these weaknesses. Do let your mind begin to analyze this during your prayer.

Our attention must be concentrated on the heart and not on the brain. You should feel the action of the Jesus Prayer on your heart. You will feel a warmth. It is important to realize that we love God first with our hearts and then with our mind. Our present condition has this reversed. This is what we are trying to correct through our practice of the prayer. We aim to open our heart and feel the sting of our repentance. You may feel some soreness initially around the heart. Don't mind this just keep your attention focused on the prayer. There are some people who have thought they have been afflicted with heart disease and go visit doctors who can find nothing wrong. It is a pain similar to those you have when exercising after a period of no exercise. It is the pain of grace you are feeling.²⁹

Remember, this is a process and you will go through stages. Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov reminds us that our simple attentive beginnings lead us to the temple of the heart.

²⁷ Theophan, *Art of Prayer*, p 100

²⁸ Saint John of the Ladder, *Ladder* 28:17

²⁹ Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*, pp 84-86

It is one thing to pray with attention with the participation of the heart; it is another thing to descend with the mind into the temple of the heart and from there to offer mystical prayer filled with divine grace and power. The second is a result of the first. The attention of the mind during prayer draws the heart into sympathy. With the strengthening of the attention, sympathy of heart and mind is turned into union of heart and mind. Finally, when the attention makes the prayer its own, the mind descends into the heart for the most profound and sacred service of prayer. All this is accomplished under the guidance of the grace of God. It is harmful to strive for the second before acquiring the first.³⁰

How long to pray

Be sure to consult your spiritual Father on the amount of time you should devote to the Jesus prayer. As a general rule you should repeat it for a minimum of 15 minutes at any one prayer session. Any less will not help you develop the attention needed for prayer of the heart. You should then fairly quickly work up to a period of thirty minutes. You will need to measure your time to make sure you fulfill your desired time. One way is with a clock. Another way is to use a prayer rope.³¹ A prayer rope has 50 or 100 knots typically. Holding it between your thumb and index finger you can index one knot at a time each time you complete one complete recitation of the Jesus prayer.

Possible Problems Encountered

Sleep or drowsiness can be a problem in prayer. When you come from a very busy and tense environment, your body changes dramatically when you enter into prayer. It relaxes to the extent that you may then fall asleep. As you begin to concentrate the neuromuscular system begins to relax and this may cause drowsiness. When you feel this condition coming on you can change your position. If you are using a seated position for prayer, consider standing for prayer which for some is a preferred position. If you are praying silently in the mind, begin to say the prayer orally. If you are saying the prayer orally, say it louder. Make a few prostrations. Drowsiness is a condition that you will have to fight. If you let it become a pattern, it too will get etched into your brain and become more and more difficult to overcome. You can develop an automatic response of drowsiness every time you begin to pray. Don't let this condition be distressing as it simply means that your nervous system has begun to relax. It is an indicator that you have successfully made a transition from your normal hectic world to one that is much slower and relaxed. Learn to take some gentle action to fight it off.

It is also possible that you may experience strong emotions during prayer. This can happen as you begin to find a deeper level of concentration and feel like you are about to enter in the place of the heart. If you are overcome with strong emotions simply open your eyes for a moment, make the sign of the cross and a few prostrations and then continue on with your prayer. If you experience tears this is a good sign, but do not delight in the tears. They are normally accompanied with a feeling of humility and contrition coupled with a profound love for God.

³⁰ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*, p 48

³¹ A prayer rope (Greek: komboskini) is a loop made up of complex knots, usually out of wool,. Historically, the prayer rope would typically have 100 knots, although prayer ropes with 50 or 33 knots can also be found in use today. The invention of the prayer rope is attributed to Saint Pachomius in the fourth century as an aid for illiterate monks to accomplish a consistent number of prayers and prostrations in their cells. Previously, monks would count their prayers by casting pebbles into a bowl, but this was cumbersome, and could not be easily carried about when outside the cell.

Another problem is seeing lights, images or even apparitions. They may even seem like bright ones. Saint Nil Sorski tells us,

*“Do not permit yourself any concepts, images, or visions. For vivid images darting to and fro, and flights of fancy do not cease even when the mind stand in the heart and recites prayer: no one is able to rule over them, except those who have attained perfection by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and who have acquired stability of mind through Jesus Christ.”*³²

Saint Gregory the Sinaite warns similarly,

*It must be completely imageless and we must on no account give freedom to the imagination or allow the fancy to form an image of any saint or light; because usually delusions, especially at the beginning deceive the minds of the inexperienced with false fantasies.*³³

The imagination is very strong and active. It will be stimulated by things in your memory. You may project into the future or dig back into unpleasant past. You want to dispel all images from your mind in prayer.³⁴ Apparitions are especially dangerous. If you ever do have an apparition while praying, do not listen to, respond, or follow its direction, even if it is the Theotokos or your patron saint. Ignore it and immediately arrange to see your spiritual Father for advice. Any legitimate encounter will be surrounded with peacefulness and love and will return if it is legitimate. Such images are a common way the evil spirits work on us to mislead us. Often this work of the imagination will help us see a sinful past that we need to cleanse through the sacrament of Confession. Be sure to see your spiritual father when you experience any such images.

Cautions

There are some cautions that are in order when practicing the Jesus Prayer.

- First, you should not practice this method of prayer unless you are regularly attending worship services, participating in the Sacraments of the Church, and reading the Scriptures.
- Second, you should not force yourself into the discovery within yourself of the action of the prayer of the heart.
- Third, you should not connect this practice with breathing exercises or other yoga techniques unless you are directed by your spiritual father.

Remember, delusion is your enemy. *“An insignificant, unnoticed hope or trust in something outside God can stop the advance of progress... Faith in God is leader, guide, legs and wings.”*³⁵ If you begin to think that it is by your efforts that you will find unity with God, you are being deluded and in great spiritual danger.

Pride in your accomplishments through these efforts can stop you dead in your tracks. Any hint of pride needs to be recognized. Grace comes with humility. As soon as you feel pride recognize it and ask for forgiveness. If you don't, your prayer will become cold and dark. Once you repent, recognize your error and ask for forgiveness, you will be able continue on the path. This is normal. We fall down and we seek help and mercy asking for forgiveness and we

³² Saint Nil Sorski, *Art of Prayer*, p 101

³³ Saint Gregory Sinaite, *On the Prayer of Jesus* by Ignatius Brianchaninov, p 67

³⁴ Saint Theophan, *Art of Prayer*, p 101

³⁵ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*, p 85

cleanse ourselves of impurity. We do this time and time again. Through this process, step by step, we become purer and our prayer life deepens until we find the union of love with God.

To make progress in your prayer practice you must be regular in your practice. This is not a Monday, Wednesday or Friday or whenever thing, but is something that has to be engaged every day without fail. Every day you miss will set you back at least three days. Make it an integral part of your life just like you take a shower and brush your teeth in the morning. Just like you don't feel clean if you skip these daily activities, see prayer as a necessary cleansing of your soul. Put your prayer life as your first priority. Don't let travel or sickness deter you. This prayer can be said anywhere, any time if necessary. You don't need any special books or other props only the love and desire to be united with God.

Use of the Prayer at Other Times

In addition to your regular periods of prayer you should try and take every opportunity you can to say the Jesus Prayer. Whenever you have an idle moment begin to say the prayer. When you are waiting in a checkout line in the store say the prayer quietly to yourself. When you are waiting for an appointment in the doctors office, instead of picking up a magazine, begin to say the Jesus Prayer. Every chance you get to say the prayer will help you keep your mind focused on God.

When you face difficulty during the day or find yourself becoming angry, immediately begin to say the prayer to yourself. When you become angry or irritated, you can take a prayer walk. Get up from where you are, excuse yourself like you were going to the bathroom and instead take a walk where you can be alone. As you walk repeat the prayer in alignment with your steps until you calm down. You will find this very helpful to bring you back to a loving state where you can make better decisions about how to deal with the situation at hand. You can also use it while you are doing your daily exercise instead of reading or watching TV.

You can also use this prayer before and after meals as your prayer. You can use it before starting any task. Any time you say the prayer it will bring your attention to God and enliven your soul so your actions are more likely to be congruent with what God intends for you.

At night time you can also say the Jesus Prayer as you try and go to sleep. There will come a time when you will actually pray while you sleep. At the time of falling asleep we enter a path that leads into our deepest consciousness. This occurs between the time we are awake and asleep. Its the ideal time to send this prayer deep into your heart. Rejoice when the first thing you want to do when you awake in the morning is to repeat the prayer.

The Jesus prayer can help you get rid of recurring painful memories. When they arise simply begin to say the prayer. Also, when you experience any kind of pain say the Jesus Prayer. Instead of taking drugs to numb your feelings, try and repeat the Jesus prayer over and over until the pain subsides. When you are sitting in the dentist chair and tense as the dentist is about to begin to drill on your tooth, say the prayer to yourself and relax. Anytime you feel the anticipation of pain begin to say the prayer.

The Orthodox Way of Life

There is much more to the Orthodox spiritual life than the practice of the Jesus prayer. The Orthodox way of life is comprehensive. Here are other elements that we need to remember to practice:

1. **Worshiping and Participating in Sacraments**
Attend and participate in the Divine Liturgy receiving Holy Communion regularly as well as regular participation in Confession.
2. **Honoring the Liturgical Cycle of the Church**
Follow the seasons of the church and participate in the fasts and feasts of the Church.
3. **Slowing Down and Ordering Your Life**
Set priorities and reduce the stress and friction caused by a hurried life.
4. **Watchfulness**
Give full attention to what you are doing at the moment.
5. **Taming the Passions**
Overcome your habits, attachment to your likes and dislikes, and learn to practice the virtues.
6. **Putting Others First - living the Commandments.**
Free yourself from your selfishness and find joy in helping others.
7. **Spiritual Companionship**
Spend time regularly with other Orthodox Christians for support and inspiration.
8. **Reading the Scriptures and Holy Fathers**
Be inspired by the lessons of the Holy Scriptures, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and the lives of the Saints of the Church.

Not by Our Effort Alone

We must remember that attaining prayer in the heart through the use of the Jesus prayer does require our effort. But it cannot be realized without the help of divine grace. Saints Kallistus and Ignatius advise us that the labor of mental prayer is *“accomplished by the mind and through the single-thought, heartfelt, pure, unwandering invocation with faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, and not through the one, mere natural art... of sitting in a quiet and dark place with practicing the prayer--God forbid!”*³⁶ Methods we use are only to help us stop the wandering of the mind and bring it to attentiveness on God.

Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov says,

*Let us practice the prayer of Jesus disinterestedly, with simplicity and purity of intention, with penitence as our objective, with faith in God, with complete surrender to the will of God, with hope and trust in the wisdom, goodness and omnipotence of His holy will.... Let us not seek pleasures or visions... Let us seek to turn the gaze of our mind within ourselves our sinfulness. When we discover it, let us stand mentally before our Lord Jesus Christ in the company of lepers, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the paralyzed, the possessed; and let us begin our mournful cry of prayer before Him from the poverty of our spirit and from a heart crushed with sorrow for our sinfulness.*³⁷

Prepared by Saint George Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Greenville, SC

³⁶ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*. p 76

³⁷ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*, p 102-103