

Theophan the Recluse, On Prayer, Homily 4

Written by Theophan the Recluse
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Three times I have spoken to you about prayer¹: about how to read prayers with attention, about how to ascend to God mentally and in your heart, and how to stand constantly before God with a burning spirit. The Lord instructed us in various degrees and types of prayer, so that each, according to his strength, could be a partaker in the goodness of prayer. For the work of prayer is a great work. It is, as I have said, the testimony of the spiritual life, and also the food of the spiritual life. Therefore one must work towards perfection in prayer more than all other things.

I have reminded you how to succeed in each type of prayer. Now I want to remind you, as a warning, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to succeed in prayer, if we do not at the same time work on other virtues.

If we compare prayer to a perfume, and the soul to a bottle for perfume, then we will understand that as perfume does not keep its fragrance in a container full of holes, also the soul cannot continue to pray if there is a lack of virtue. If we compare someone who prays to the whole body, then we see the following lesson: as it is impossible for a man without legs to walk, even if the rest of his body is healthy, so it is impossible to approach God, or reach God in prayer, without active virtue. Look in the apostolic teachings, and you will see that in them prayer does not stand alone, but together with a whole host of virtues. For example, the apostle Paul arms a Christian in spiritual battle and dresses him in the full armor of God. Look at what this is: The belt is truth, the armor is righteousness, the shoes are the gospel of peace, the shield is faith, the helmet is hope, the sword is the word of God ([Eph 6.14-17](#)). Such weapons! After all of this he places his warrior in prayer as if in some sort of fortress: "pray at all times in the spirit with all sorts of prayer and petition" ([Eph 6.18](#)). It is, of course, possible for prayer alone to defeat all enemies, but in order to be strong in prayer, one must be successful in faith, hope, truth, righteousness, and all the rest. In another place, the same apostle adorns the soul with bridal clothing as the bride of Christ, saying, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" ([Col 3.12-16](#)). In many other places in the word of God, prayer is bound up tightly with all the other virtues, as their queen, after which they all strive, and which draws all of them after itself, or even better, as their fragrant flower. As it is necessary for a flower to be covered with leaves as well as having a stem, branches and root, in order to attract attention, it is also necessary for prayer to be accompanied by other good spiritual inclinations and labors in order to blossom like a flower in the soul; faith is

the root, active love is like a stem and branches, and labors of a spiritual-physical nature are like leaves. When such a holy tree is planted in the soul, then in the morning, and in the evening, and during the course of the day, according to its state, the flowers of prayer will freely blossom and fill all of our inner chambers with fragrance.

I remind you of all of this, so that no one would think: "I labor in prayer, and that is enough". No - one must work and be zealous for all things together, both praying and working at all the virtues. It is true that it is impossible to succeed in virtues without prayer, but it is also necessary to work at the virtues while praying, so that the prayer can show its cooperation in these virtues. In order to succeed in prayer, one must pray, but the labor of prayer should be used as the means to virtues. One must be concerned about all things, and always strive to be on the right side. The same thing happens in a clock. A clock works properly and shows the correct time only when all of the gears and other parts inside are complete and in their correct place, and joined together properly. This is the same in our inner spiritual mechanism: the striving of the soul will be true like an arrow, directed straight toward God, when all other parts of the soul are whole and are established in their correct places, so to speak, put in place by virtue.

I will teach you what sort of virtues should surround your prayer, or what sort of prayerful, virtuous life a Christian should plant in himself, not in my own words, but in the words of the holy hierarch Dimitri of Rostov, who briefly lists these things in the following instructions (from Christian Spiritual Instruction, part 1, p. 288):

1. When you wake up, let your first thought be about God, your first word be a prayer to God your creator and keeper of your life, Who is always able to give life or destroy it, who can strike with illness and heal, and who can save or destroy.
2. Bow and give thanks to God Who raised you from sleep, and Who did not allow you to perish in your sins, but with long-suffering awaited your repentance.
3. Make a start for better things, saying with the Psalmist: "I said, now I have made a beginning" ([Ps. 76.11](#)) For no one completes the path to heaven except he who makes a good beginning everyday.
4. From the morning pray like the Seraphim, act like the Cherubim, and be surrounded with angels.
5. Do not waste time any longer. Do only those things which are necessary.
6. In all deeds and words, keep your mind in God; do not write anything in your mind except Christ, and let no image touch your pure heart except the pure image of Christ our God and Savior.
7. Awaken yourself to the love of God in all things, whenever you are able, especially say to yourself with the Psalmist: "in my meditation a fire was kindled" ([Ps. 38.4](#)).
8. You desire to love God, Whose visitation you always see and gaze upon with your interior eyes, therefore turn away from all evil deeds, words, and thoughts. Do, say, and think all things honorably, humbly, and with the fear of a son.
9. Let meekness with praise and humility with honor be together.

10. Let your words be quiet, humble, honorable, and useful. Let silence decide the words that you say. From henceforth, let no empty or rotten word escape your lips.
11. If something funny happens, allow yourself only a smile, and this not often.
12. You will fall into prodigality through anger, wrath, and arguing: keep yourself moderate in anger.
13. Always observe moderation in eating and drinking.
14. Be condescending in all things, and God will bless you, and people will praise you.
15. You must pray about your death, which is the end of all things.

See what sort of wonderful life is taught to the praying Christian. It is true that in one place we have spoken more about prayer, that is, of mental and heart-felt turning to God, but in another place, other virtues have been mentioned, and yet without all of them together, it is impossible to get a foothold in prayer. Let everyone strive in knowledge: standing in prayer and exercising is according to your instruction. How can you stand to pray if you are weighed down with intemperance, or carried away with anger, or if you do not stand in peace, or you are distracted by work and lack of attention and so on? If we are to avoid these things, then we are to strive to attain the opposite: that is, virtue. For this reason, St. John of the Ladder speaks of prayer, saying that it is the mother and the daughter of virtues.

Hearing this, some might say, "what great demands! What a heavy burden! Where can I ever find time and the strength?" But be strong, brethren! Very little is necessary, and one must only take up one thing: zeal for God and salvation in Him in your soul. By its nature, the soul has much good in it and it is only misdirected into all evil things. As soon as zeal for salvation and the pleasing of God is born in one's soul, all of the goodness gathers around this zeal, and immediately no small amount of good appears in the soul. Then zeal, strengthened by the grace of God, with the help of this initial good, begins to find more goodness, and enriches itself with it, and all begins to grow by degrees. Zeal itself has the beginnings of prayer already. It is fed at first by natural virtue, and then begins to feed on the works of virtue that it engendered, and grows and becomes strong, and blossoms and begins to sing and hymn God with a harmonious and prayerful song in the heart.

May the Lord help you succeed in this. Amen.

Translated from the Russian by Rev. Fr. Michael van Opstall – January 2007

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