

On Prayer



From the Letters of Bishop Theophan the Recluse

The Art and Science of Prayer (from Letter 15)

You write that you prayed fervently and at once you were calmed, receiving an inner assurance that you would be released from oppression; and then, indeed, it was so....

Recall how you prayed and always strive to pray this way, so that prayer comes from the heart and is not just thought by the mind and chattered by the tongue.

I won't conceal the fact that, though once you prayed from the heart, it is hardly possible to pray that way constantly. Such prayer is given by God or is inspired by your Guardian Angel. It comes and goes. It does not follow, though, that we should give up the labor of prayer. Prayer of the heart comes when one makes an effort; to those who do not strive, it will not come. We see that the Holy Fathers made extraordinary efforts in prayer, and by their struggles they kindled the

warm spirit of prayer. How they came to this prayerful state is illustrated in the writings they have left us. Everything they say about striving in prayer makes up the science of prayer, which is the science of sciences. The time will come when we will study this art [see the classic work *The Art of Prayer* (Faber & Faber)—webmaster]. But now, since it came up in our correspondence, I touch on it only in passing. Let me add: There is nothing more important than prayer; therefore, our greatest attention and most diligent attention must attend it. *Grant us, O Lord, zeal for such an effort!*

Wandering Thoughts during Prayer (from Letter 31)

Thoughts wander when one is reading spiritual works and during prayer. What should one do? No one is free from this. There is no sin in it, only vexation. Having wandering thoughts becomes a sin when one willingly allows flightiness of mind. But if thoughts scatter involuntarily, what fault can there be? There is fault, though, when one notices thoughts wandering and, taking no action, one wanders along with them. When we catch our thoughts wandering off, we must bring them back to their proper place at once.

To be free from the tendency to have wandering thoughts during prayer, one must concentrate and pray with warmth. Before prayer, one should prepare for such an effort by making prostrations and by a moment of reflection.

Accustom yourself to pray your own prayers. For instance: it is the essence of evening prayer to thank God for the day and everything that happened, both pleasant and unpleasant; to ask forgiveness for all wrongs committed, promising to improve during the next day; and to pray that God preserve you during sleep. Express all this to God from your mind and from your whole heart.

The essence of morning prayer is to thank God for sleep, rest and regained strength and to pray that He will help us do everything to His glory. Express this to Him with your mind and with your whole heart. Along with such prayers in the morning and evening, present your greatest needs to the Lord, especially spiritual needs. Besides spiritual needs, present your worldly cares, saying to Him as would a child: "See, O Lord, my sickness and weakness! Help and heal!" All this and the like can be spoken before God in your own words, without the use of a prayer book. Try this and, if it works, you may leave the prayer book altogether; but if not, you must pray with the prayer book, otherwise you might end up with no prayer at all.

Spiritual Coldness (from Letter 40)

You have correctly determined that the enemy of our fundamental striving for prayer, and, therefore, our chief enemy, is a [spiritual] cooling. Oh, what a bitter and wretched state it is! But realize that not all decrease in the heat of fervor is pernicious chill. Some comes from weakness, other from disease of the body. Neither is bad; both will pass.

Disastrous cooling down is caused by falling away from God's will, through our own willful passion for anything ungodly. Willful passion runs counter to our conscience, which tries to enlighten and to keep us from ungodly desires. Willful passion kills the spirit and cuts off spiritual life. This you must fear most of all—as fire, as death itself. Willful passion is caused by a loss of the fear of God and by inattention to oneself. These, then, you must watch for in order to avoid such a terrible evil. As for those times when a cooling down comes involuntarily, due to sickness or weakness of body, one law applies: Endure, without changing your appointed rule, even if it is completely without savor. For those who endure patiently, cold feelings pass, and the usual warm and heartfelt fervor quickly returns.

Please, hold it in your mind and make it a rule, never to let cooling arbitrarily steal away your fervor. In case of unavoidable cooling, make it another rule to drag and to keep dragging through your established prayer rule, with the assurance that this dry performance of deeds will soon bring back life and warmth to your prayer.

Brief Prayers (from Letter 42)

Zealous Christians have a certain technique that they apply to secure the continual remembrance of God more firmly. It is the constant repetition of a short prayer, ordinarily either, "Lord, have mercy," or "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." If you haven't heard this, then listen now. If you have never done this, begin now.

Time Will Bring a Constant Remembrance of God (from Letter 43)

Be encouraged! Take up prayer more readily and continue without interruptions—and you will soon achieve your desired goal. Soon a reverent attention to the One God will be established, and with it, inner peace. I say soon, not now, or in a day or two. Months may be required, sometimes, even years. Ask the Lord and He will help.

Prayer Rule (from Letter 47)

You ask about the prayer rule. Yes, because of our weakness, it is proper to have a prayer rule. For one thing, it controls excessive zeal. The great men of prayer had a prayer rule and kept to it. Every time, they began prayer with the established prayers, and then, if self-initiated prayer came, they turned to it from reciting prayers. If *they* needed a prayer rule, then we need one even more! Without formal prayers, we would not know how to pray correctly at all. Without them, we would be completely without prayer.

Nevertheless, we should not collect too many prayers. A few prayers, correctly read, are better than many prayers raced through. And, of course, it is hard to keep from rushing when, in our eagerness to pray, we have gathered more prayers than we can handle.

For you, it is quite adequate to complete the morning and evening prayers as they are found in the prayer book. Always strive to complete them with as much attention and feeling as possible. To do this successfully, make an effort in your spare time to read them with extra care, attention and feeling, so that when you are at prayer, you will be familiar with the holy thoughts and feelings contained in them. Praying does not mean repeating a certain number of words of prayer; praying is reproducing the contents of the prayers within ourselves, so that they flow as if from our own mind and heart.

Having contemplated their meaning and reacted deeply, make an effort to learn the prayers by heart, so when it is time for prayer, you will not have to fumble with books and lighting. If you learn prayers by heart, you will not be distracted by what your eyes see, and you will be able to hold your mind's attention more steadily upon God.

You will see for yourself how beneficial this is. Learning prayers by heart ensures that at all times and in every circumstance the prayers are with you, and this means a great deal.

Having so prepared yourself to stand at prayer, strive to keep your mind from drifting away and strive to keep your feelings from turning cold and indifferent. Always strain to pay attention and to nurture warmth. After reading each prayer, do as many prostrations as you feel necessary, or say the usual short prayer (that is, the Jesus Prayer). Your prayers, no doubt, will take longer this way, but they will grow in strength.

Particularly at the end of your prayer rule, spend additional time saying your own prayers. Ask for forgiveness for involuntary inattention during prayer and surrender yourself to God's care for the whole day.

We must continue to hold our attention on God during the day. To support our attention, I have said more than once: Remember God through a briefly worded prayer.

At times, it is very fruitful to substitute a few psalms for the short prayer psalms you have reflected upon thoroughly and memorized. You can do this during free moments and throughout the day's activities. Repeating memorized psalms is an ancient Christian custom that was developed and brought into the monastic rule in the fourth century by Saints Pachomius and Anthony [the Great].

After spending the entire day in such a prayerful attitude, take even more time in the evening to concentrate at prayer and increase your prostrations. Intensify your supplications to God and, having again dedicated to God's care, bed down with a brief prayer on your lips and fall asleep with it, or with the repetition of a psalm.

Which psalms to learn? Memorize those that drop into your heart when you read them. Different people are moved by different psalms. Begin with Psalm 50, then Psalms 102 and 145, the antiphons for the Liturgy; also, the psalms from the Preparation for Communion (Psalms 22, 2:3, 115); as well as Psalm 69, Psalm 4 (the first psalm of [Great] Compline [during the first week of Great Lent]), the psalms for the Hours, and the like. Read the Psalter and choose.

Having memorized all this, you will be totally armed for prayer. When a disturbing thought comes to mind, rush to the Lord with a brief prayer or some psalm, especially, "O God, be attentive unto helping me" (Psalm 69), and the disturbing cloud will immediately vanish.

That summarizes prayer rules.

But I repeat: Remember, all of this is a guide. The heart of the matter is: *Stand with reverence before God, with the mind in the heart, and strive toward Him with longing.*

A Prayer Rule of Brief Prayers (same Letter)

It occurs to me to add this: You may substitute prostrations, the brief prayer and your own words of prayer for your whole prayer rule.

Stand and begin to do prostrations by saying, "Lord, have mercy," or some other prayer expressing your needs, or by glorifying God or thanking Him. To avoid laziness, you must repeat a definite number of prayers, or set a specific length of time for prayer, or both.

Such a prayer rule is imperative because we have a certain, strange quirk about us. When we are busy in the world, hours pass as minutes. But when we stand at prayer, a minute does not go by, and it seems as though we have prayed for hours. Time distortion brings no harm when we complete a full, established prayer rule from our prayer book. But when we pray with only prostrations and the brief prayer, such distortion can be a great temptation and can cause us to stop prayer, having only begun, leaving us with the delusion that our prayer was completed as prescribed. To avoid falling into this kind of deception, the good men of prayer invented the prayer rope. The prayer rope is used by those who plan to pray independently of the prayer book. It is used by saying, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner, ' and pulling one knot through your fingers.

Say it again and move another knot, and so on with each prayer. You may make a prostration, from the waist or to the ground as you desire, at each prayer. Or for small knots, you may do a

bow from the waist; large knots, prostrations. The whole rule consists of a fixed number of prayers and prostrations, interspersed with prayers in your own words.

Speeding up the repetition of prayers and prostrations is another danger. After you determine a set number of prayers, it is a good idea to guard yourself from haste by setting a definite length of time in which to complete the prayer rule. If you find you have rushed the prayers, fill the time with more prayers and prostrations.

The number of prayers to substitute for a fixed service of liturgical prayer is listed at the end of the Horologion in two tables, one for the zealous, and another one for the slothful or those who are busy. The *Startsi* [Elders] who still live among us in hermitages and special cells, at Valaam and Solovki for instance, do all their services on the prayer rope. This is how you go about it: See how long it takes you to read through your morning and evening prayers; then count out on the prayer rope how many prayers you can do in that length of time, and as many times as you can complete the prayer rope, that should be your rule, following this method. Work out your prayer rope rule outside of your regular prayer time, but with the same attention you would give to regular prayer. You should then proceed with your actual prayer rule at its appointed time, standing and with prostrations.

Reading this, don't think that I am pushing you toward monasticism. I myself first learned of prayer with the prayer rope, not from a monk, but from a layman, for many lay people pray this way. And you too will profit by this. When prayers from the prayer book become tedious and uninspiring, you may use the prayer rope for a day or two, then return to your memorized prayers.

Again I repeat: The essence of prayer lies in lifting the mind and heart to God. Prayer rules are only aids to this end. We weak ones cannot do without them.

Hard Work is Essential (from Letter 48)

You write that you are having trouble controlling your thoughts; they scatter easily, and praying does not proceed as you wish; and that, in the midst of the day, in the midst of toil and association with others, there is little remembrance of God.

Instantaneous prayer life is impossible. You must make a strong effort to control your thoughts, at least to some degree. Prayer does not come about as you expect—by just wishing for it, and, suddenly, there it is. This does not happen.

Forcing Oneself to Pray (same Letter)

You have the book of discourses by St. Macarius of Egypt. Kindly read the 19th discourse, concerning a Christian's duty to force himself to do good. There it is written, "One must force oneself to pray, even if one has no spiritual prayer." And, "In such a case, God, seeing that a man earnestly is striving, pushing himself against the will of his heart (that is, his thoughts), He grants him true prayer." By true prayer, St. Macarius means the undistracted, collected, deep prayer that occurs when the mind stands unswervingly before God. As the mind begins to stand firmly before God, it discovers such sweetness, that it wishes to remain in true prayer forever, desiring nothing more.

I have stated more than once exactly what efforts must be made: Do not allow your thoughts to wander at will. When they do involuntarily escape, immediately turn them back, rebuking yourself, lamenting and grieving over this disorder. As St. John of the Ladder says, "We must lock our mind into the words of prayer by force. "

When you have learned the prayers by heart, as I suggested in my earlier letter, perhaps then you will progress more smoothly.

The most helpful idea is to attend church frequently. There, prayers come more readily because all is directed to that end, but this is not very practicable for you. So, labor at home to accustom yourself to pray attentively and try to remain in God's presence the rest of the time, as much as possible.

When memorizing the prayers, do not forget to dig into the meaning and to experience the feeling in each word. Then when you say the prayer, the words themselves will hold your attention and warm you into a prayerful attitude.

Preparation for Prayer (from Letter 48)

Do this also. Prepare yourself to stand properly before God—don't just jump into prayer after gossiping and gadding about or doing house chores. Schedule the time and rouse the urge to pray precisely at that hour. Another opportunity may not come.

Don't forget to re-establish your sense of spiritual need. Bring your need for God to the front of your mind, then begin to draw your mind into your heart by organizing your thoughts into prayer and calling forth your desire to find their fulfillment in God.

When the heart is conscious and feels the need for prayer, then the attentive heart itself will not let your thoughts slide to other matters. It will force you to cry out to the Lord in your prayers. Most of all, be aware of your own helplessness: were it not for God, you would be lost. If someone who is doomed to disaster were to stand before the one person who, with a glance, could save him, would he look here and there for his salvation? No, he would fall down before him and beg mercy. So it will be when you approach Him in prayer with an awareness of all-encompassing peril and the knowledge that no one can save you but God.

All of us have this little sin hanging about us. Though we make painstaking preparations for every other task (no matter how trivial), we do not prepare for prayer. We take up prayer with flighty thoughts, willy-nilly, and rush to get it over with, as if it were an incidental, though unavoidable, bother—and not the center of our life, as it should be.

Without preparation, how can there be a gathering of thought and feeling in prayer? Without preparation, prayer proceeds shakily instead of firmly.

No, you must determine to deny yourself this little sin and under no circumstance allow yourself to come to prayer with your heart and mind unprepared, your thoughts and feelings scattered in a dozen directions. Such a careless attitude toward prayer is a crime, a *serious* one—a capital one. Consider prayer the central labor of your life and hold it in the center of your heart. Address it in its rightful role, not as a secondary function!

Toil! God will be your helper. Take care to fulfill your prayer rule. If you begin to fulfill it, soon, very soon, you will see the fruits of your labor. Strive to experience the sweetness of pure prayer. Once experienced, pure prayer will draw you on and enliven your spiritual life, beckoning you to more attentive, more difficult, and ever-deepening prayer.

Worldly Cares (from Letter 49)

There is a widely-accepted misconception among us that when one becomes involved in work at home or in business, immediately one steps out of the godly realm and away from God-pleasing activities. From this idea, it follows that once the desire to strive toward God germinates, and

talk turns toward the spiritual life, then the idea inevitably surfaces: one must run from society, from the home—to the wilderness, to the forest.

Both premises are erroneous!

Homes and communities depend on concerns of daily life and society. These concerns are God-appointed obligations; fulfilling them is not a step toward the ungodly, but is a walking in the way of the Lord.

All who cleave to these erroneous premises fall into the bad habit of thinking that once they accept worldly obligations, they no longer need strive towards God.

I see that these misconceptions have trapped you also. Cast them aside and grasp the concept that everything you do, in and outside your home, concerning social life, as a daughter, as a sister, as a Muscovite—is godly and God-pleasing. There is an appointed commandment for everything in our lives. How can the fulfillment of commandments be displeasing to God? Your misconceptions truly *make* them ungodly, because you fulfill your daily tasks with an attitude contrary to the one God intended you to have.

You complete godly deeds in an ungodly manner. They are needlessly lost and tear your mind from God. Correct this and, from now on, approach daily matters with the knowledge that to fulfill them is a commandment. Administer them as administering God's law.

Once you adjust yourself to this outlook, no worldly duty will distract you from God. Instead, it will bring you close to Him. We are all servants of our God. God has assigned to each his place and responsibilities, and He watches to see how each approaches his assignment. He is everywhere. And He watches over you. Keep this in mind and do each deed as if it were assigned to you directly by God, no matter what it is.

Do your housework in this manner: When someone comes to visit, keep in mind that God has sent you this visitor, and is watching. When you have to leave your house, keep in mind that God has sent you out on an errand, and is watching. Will you complete it as He wishes?

By orienting yourself to God at all times, your chores at home and responsibilities outside the house will not distract your attention from God, but, on the contrary, will keep you intent on completing all tasks in a God-pleasing manner. All will be performed with the fear of God, and this fear will keep your attention on God unswervingly.

To determine which duties inside and outside the family are God-pleasing, take the books in which these matters are discussed as your guides. Be careful to distinguish between concerns prompted by frivolity, passions, flattery and worldliness, from those that are correct, appropriate and honorable.

Of course, having expressed the firm determination to live in a God-pleasing manner, you will need no prompting to discriminate between godly tasks and ungodly ones.

Nurturing the Desire for God (from Letter 51)

Do you wish to enter Paradise more quickly? This is what you must do: When you pray, do not complete your prayer before arousing in your heart some feeling toward God—reverence, loyalty, thanksgiving, exaltation, humility, contrition, or assurance and hope in God...

Carelessness and Presumption in Prayer (from Letter 71)

Well, where has your prayer vanished? It seems to have started off quite well, and you had already experienced its grace-filled actions in your heart. I will tell you where it has gone.

Having prayed once or twice with warmth and in earnest, and having experienced such immediate help through prayer at the shrine of St. Sergius, you thought your prayer was forever established, and that there was no need to maintain it. You thought it would flow by itself. Expecting prayer to continue on its own, you began to rush and carelessly left your thoughts to wander unchecked. From this, your attention scattered, thought went in all directions, and your prayer was no longer true. Once, twice in such a careless manner, and prayer disappeared. Begin anew to establish prayer and plead with the Lord to help you.

Haste in Prayer (from the same Letter)

I presume that you negligently rushed to complete your prayer rule, just to get by. Make it a rule, from now on, never to pray negligently. Nothing is more offensive to God than this. It is better to leave out part of your prayer rule and to complete the remainder reverently and with fear of God, than to do the whole prayer rule, and do it negligently. It is even better to read but one prayer, or fall on your knees and pray in your own words, than to pray negligently. If you pray carelessly, there will be no fruit.

Give yourself a thorough reprimand for such carelessness. Let this be clear to you: No one who prays earnestly and with attention ends prayer without feeling the effect of prayer. Oh, of what a blessing we deprive ourselves by allowing negligence in prayer!

A Fixed Time for Prayer (from the same Letter)

Why does haste in prayer occur? It is incomprehensible. We spend hours involved in other things, and they seem like minutes; but just begin to pray, and it seems we have stood for a long time. And then we feel we must hurry to finish as soon as possible. No benefit is reaped by praying in this way. What should one do?

To avoid such self-deception, some do this: Set a definite length of time for prayer—a quarter of an hour, a half, or a whole hour (whatever is convenient), and regulate your vigil so that the clock striking on the half hour or the hour signals the end of prayers. Then when you begin prayers, do not concern yourself with the number of prayers read, but only lift your heart and mind to the Lord in prayer, and continue in a worthy manner for the time set aside. Others determine how many prayers can be done on the prayer rope in a given time and proceed in a calm and unhurried way to count them on the prayer rope. They stand with their minds before the Lord, or converse with Him in their own words, or recite some prayer, and this is how they reverently venerate His unending glory.

Such people so accustom themselves to praying, that the minutes at prayer are filled with sweetness. And it is rare that they remain just for the appointed time; they double and even triple it. Choose one of these methods for yourself and hold to it earnestly. You and I cannot go without definite rules. For those who can pray fervently, no rules are necessary.

I have already written to you about memorizing prayers, and reciting them from memory at prayer time without taking the prayer book in hand. How wonderful this is! Having begun to pray, recite a memorized prayer or psalm and ponder every word, not only in your mind, but in your heart. If your own prayer begins to grow from a word in the psalm or prayer, don't cut it off, let it flow. Do not worry about reading this many or that many prayers, but stand at prayer for an appointed length of time, regulated either by the prayer rope or the clock. Haste in prayers is useless. Perhaps you may read only a single prayer or one psalm during the entire time. There was one person who was able to recite only the Lord's Prayer during his regular prayer time; each word transformed itself into a whole prayer. Another person, having been told about this acceptable manner of praying, revealed that he had stood all through Matins reciting Psalm 50,

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy"—and ran out of time before he could finish.

Prayer: the Root of All Things (from the same Letter)

Accustom yourself to pray this way and, God grant, soon you will nurture true prayer in yourself. Then there will be no need for rules. Labor, or nothing will come of you. If there is no success in prayer, then there will be no success in anything. It is the root of everything.

The Need for Prayer (Letter 79)

All is from God. To Him we must flee. And you write that you don't pray.

Smart-aleck! Have you joined the ranks of the infidels, or what? How is it possible that you don't pray? Don't just read the appointed prayers; speak in your own words and tell Him what is in your heart; ask for help! "See, Lord, what troubles me?...this and this... I can't straighten myself out. Help, All-Merciful One!" Mention every little thing and plead for everything's appropriate cure. This will be true prayer. You may always pray your own prayers, as long as there is no backsliding into sloth.

From Various Letters

One should not always toil at spiritual things. You should have some simple handiwork to do. But take it up only when the soul is tired, and cannot read or think or even pray to God (Letter 33).

You should pray in your own words—before you have recited formal prayers, after you have read them, and throughout your prayer rule (Letter 33).

Be persistent in addressing God, the Theotokos, your Guardian Angel (Letter 33).

Detours can be to the right and to the left. The first is zeal without knowledge; the second, sloth (Letter 39).

How fitting is the frequent prayer, "By whatever means, save me!" (Letter 39).

Success does not come instantly; one must be patient; one must labor without rest... All will come in due time... That this is so is supported by the experience of all those people who are seeking and working out their salvation (Letter 43).

From Orthodox Life, vol. 32, no. 4 (July-August, 1982), pp. 21-30. Translated from the Russian by Fr. Stefan Pavlenko.