

Saint Theophan the Recluse on the Jesus Prayer

The hands at work, the mind and heart with God

You have read about the Jesus Prayer, have you not? And you know what it is from practical experience. Only with the help of this prayer can the necessary order of the soul be firmly maintained; only through this prayer can we preserve our inner order undisturbed even when distracted by household cares. This prayer alone makes it possible to fulfill the injunction of the Fathers: the hands at work, the mind and heart with God. When this prayer becomes grafted in our heart, then there are no inner interruptions and it continues always in the same, evenly flowing way.

The path to achievement of a systematic interior order is very hard, but it is possible to preserve this (or a similar) state of mind during the various and inevitable duties you have to perform; and what makes it possible is the Jesus Prayer when it is grafted in the heart. How can it be so grafted ? Who knows ? But it does happen. He who strives is increasingly conscious of this engrafting, without knowing how it has been achieved. To strive for this inner order, we must walk always in the presence of God, repeating the Jesus Prayer as frequently as possible. As soon as there is a free moment, begin again at once, and the engrafting will be achieved.

One of the means of renewing the Jesus Prayer and bringing it to life is by reading, but it is best to read mainly about prayer.

The Jesus Prayer, and the warmth which accompanies it

To pray is to stand spiritually before God in our heart in glorification, thanksgiving, supplication, and contrite penitence. Everything must be spiritual. The root of all prayer is devout fear of God; from this comes belief about God and faith in Him, submission of oneself to God, hope in God, and cleaving to Him with the feeling of love, in oblivion of all created things. When prayer is powerful, all these spiritual feelings and movements are present in the heart with corresponding vigor.

How does the Jesus Prayer help us in this ?

Through the feeling of warmth which develops in and around the heart as the effect of this Prayer.

The habit of prayer is not formed suddenly, but requires long work and toil.

The Jesus Prayer, and the warmth which accompanies it, helps better than anything else in the formation of the habit of prayer.

Note that these are the means, and not the deed itself.

It is possible for both the Jesus Prayer and the feeling of warmth to be present without real prayer, This does indeed happen, however strange it may seem.

When we pray we must stand in our mind before God, and think of Him alone. Yet various thoughts keep jostling in the mind, and draw it away from God. In order to teach the mind to rest on one thing, the Holy Fathers used short prayers and acquired the habit of reciting them unceasingly. This unceasing repetition of a short prayer kept the mind on the thought of God and dispersed all irrelevant thoughts. They adopted various short prayers, but it is the Jesus Prayer which has become particularly established amongst us and is most generally employed: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner!'

So this is what the Jesus Prayer is. It is one among various short prayers, oral like all others. Its purpose is to keep the mind on the single thought of God.

Whoever has formed the habit of this Prayer and uses it properly, really does remember God incessantly.

Since the remembrance of God in a sincerely believing heart is naturally accompanied by a sense of piety, hope, thanksgiving, devotion to God's will, and by other spiritual feelings, the Jesus Prayer, which produces and preserves this remembrance of God, is called spiritual prayer. It is rightly so called only when it is accompanied by these spiritual feelings. But when not accompanied by them it remains oral like any other prayer of the same type.

This is how one should think of the Jesus Prayer. Now what is the meaning of this warmth which accompanies the practice of the Prayer ?

In order to keep the mind on one thing by the use of a short prayer, it is necessary to preserve attention and so lead it into the heart: for so long as the mind remains in the head, where thoughts jostle one another, it has no time to concentrate on one thing. But when attention descends into the heart, it attracts all the powers of the soul and body into one point there. This concentration of all human life in one place is immediately reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of future warmth. This sensation, faint at the beginning, becomes gradually stronger, firmer, deeper. At first only tepid, it grows into warm feeling and concentrates the attention upon itself And so it comes about that, whereas in the initial stages the attention is kept in the heart by an effort of will, in due course this attention, by its own vigor, gives birth to warmth in the heart. This warmth then holds the attention without special effort. From this, the two go on supporting one another, and must remain inseparable; because dispersion of attention cools the warmth, and diminishing warmth weakens attention.

From this there follows a rule of the spiritual life: if you keep the heart alive towards God, you will always be in remembrance of God. This rule is laid down by St. John of the Ladder.

The question now arises whether this warmth is spiritual. No, it is not spiritual. It is ordinary physical warmth. But since it keeps the attention of the mind in the heart, and thus helps the development there of the spiritual movements described earlier, it is called spiritual- provided, however, that it is not accompanied by sensual pleasure, however slight, but keeps the soul and body in sober mood.

From this it follows that when the warmth accompanying the Jesus Prayer does not include spiritual feelings, it should not be called spiritual, but simply warm-blooded. There is nothing in itself bad about this warm-blooded feeling, unless it is connected with sensual pleasure, however slight. If it is so connected, it is bad and must be suppressed.

Things begin to go wrong when the warmth moves about in parts of the body lower than the heart. And matters become still worse when, in enjoyment of this warmth, we imagine it to be all that matters, without bothering about spiritual feelings or even about remembrance of God; and so we set our heart only on having this warmth. This wrong course is occasionally possible, though not for all people, nor at all times. It must be noticed and corrected, for otherwise only physical warmth will remain, and we must not consider this warmth as spiritual or due to grace. This warmth is spiritual only when it is accompanied by the spiritual impetus of prayer. Anyone who calls it spiritual without this movement is mistaken. And anyone who imagines it to be due to grace is still more in error.

Warmth which is filled with grace is of a special nature and it is only this which is truly spiritual. It is distinct from the warmth of the flesh, and does not produce any noticeable changes in the body, but manifests itself by a subtle feeling of sweetness.

Everyone can easily identify and distinguish spiritual warmth by this particular feeling. Each must do it for himself: this is no business for an outsider.

The easiest way to acquire unceasing prayer

To acquire the habit of the Jesus Prayer, so that it takes root in ourselves, is the easiest way of ascending into the region of unceasing prayer. Men of the greatest experience have found, through God's enlightenment, that this form of prayer is a simple yet most effective means of establishing and strengthening the whole of the spiritual and ascetic life; and in their rules for prayer they have left detailed instructions about it.

In all our efforts and ascetic struggles, what we seek is purification of the heart and restoration of the spirit. There are two ways to this: the active way, the practice of the ascetic labors; and the contemplative way, the turning of the mind to God. By the first way the soul becomes purified and so receives God; by the second way the God of whom the soul becomes aware Himself burns away every impurity and thus comes to dwell in the purified soul. The whole of this second way is summed up in the one Jesus Prayer, as St. Gregory of Sinai says: 'God is gained either by activity and work, or by the art of invoking the Name of Jesus.' He adds that the first way is longer than the second, the second being quicker and more effective. For this reason some of the Holy Fathers have given prime importance, among all the different kinds of spiritual exercise, to the

Jesus Prayer. It enlightens, strengthens, and animates; it defeats all enemies visible and invisible, and leads directly to God. See how powerful and effective it is! The Name of the Lord Jesus is the treasury of all good things, the treasury of strength and of life in the spirit.

It follows from this that we should from the very first give full instructions on the practice of the Jesus Prayer to everyone who repents or begins to seek the Lord. Only following on from this should we introduce the beginner into other practices, because it is in this way that he can most quickly become steadfast and spiritually aware, and achieve inner peace. Many people, not knowing this, may be said to waste their time and labour in going no further than the formal and external activities of the soul and body.

The practice of prayer is called an 'art', and it is a very simple one. Standing with consciousness and attention in the heart, cry out unceasingly: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me,' without having in your mind any visual concept or image, believing that the Lord sees you and listens to you.

It is important to keep your consciousness in the heart, and as you do so to control your breathing a little so as to keep time with the words of the prayer. But the most important thing is to believe that God is near and hears. Say the prayer for God's ear alone.

At the beginning this prayer remains for a long time only an activity like any other, but in time it passes into the mind and finally takes root in the heart.

There are deviations from this right way of praying; therefore we must learn it from someone who knows all about it. Mistakes occur chiefly from the attention being in the head and not in the heart. He who keeps his attention in the heart is safe. Safer still is he who at all times clings to God in contrition, and prays to be delivered from illusion.

One thought, or the thought of One only

This short prayer to Jesus has a higher purpose-to deepen your remembrance of God and your feeling towards Him. These callings out of the soul to God are all too easily disrupted by the first incoming impression; and besides, in spite of these callings, thoughts continue to jostle in your head like mosquitoes. To stop this jostling, you must bind the mind with one thought, or the thought of One only. An aid to this is a short prayer, which helps the mind to become simple and united: it develops feeling towards God and is engrafted with it. When this feeling arises within us, the consciousness of the soul becomes established in God, and the soul begins to do everything according to His will. Together with the short prayer, you must keep your thought and attention turned towards God. But if you limit your prayer to words only, you are as 'sounding brass'.

'Techniques' and 'methods' do not matter: one thing alone is essential

The prayer, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me' is an oral prayer like any other. There is nothing special about it in itself, but it receives all its power from the state of mind in which it is made.

The various methods described by the Fathers (sitting down, making prostrations, and the other techniques used when performing this prayer) are not suitable for everyone: indeed without a personal director they are actually dangerous. It is better not to try them. There is just one method which is obligatory for all: to stand with the attention in the heart. All other things are beside the point, and do not lead to the crux of the matter.

It is said of the fruit of this prayer, that there is nothing higher in the world. This is wrong. As if it were some talisman! Nothing in the words of the prayer and their uttering can alone bring forth its fruit. All fruit can be received without this prayer, and even without any oral prayer, but merely by directing the mind and heart towards God.

The essence of the whole thing is to be established in the remembrance of God, and to walk in His presence. You can say to anyone: 'Follow whatever methods you like-recite the Jesus Prayer, perform bows and prostrations, I go to Church: do what you wish, only strive to be always in constant remembrance of God.' I remember meeting a man in Kiev who said: 'I did not use any methods at all, I did not know the Jesus Prayer, yet by God's mercy I walk always in His presence. But how this has come to pass, I myself do not know, God gave!'

It is most important to realize that prayer is always God-given: otherwise we may confuse the gift of grace with some Achievement of our own.

People say: attain the Jesus Prayer, for that is inner prayer. This is not correct. The Jesus Prayer is a good means to arrive at inner prayer, but in itself it is not inner but outer prayer. Those who attain the habit of the Jesus Prayer do very well.

But if they stop only at this and go no further, they stop half way.

Even though we are reciting the Jesus Prayer, it is still necessary for us to keep the thought of God: otherwise the Prayer is dry food. It is good that the Name of Jesus should cleave to your tongue. But with this it is still possible not to remember God at all and even to harbor thoughts which are opposed to Him. Consequently everything depends on conscious and free turning to God, and on a balanced effort to hold oneself in this.

Why the Jesus Prayer is stronger than other prayers

The Jesus Prayer is like any other prayer. It is stronger than all other prayers only in virtue of the all-powerful Name of Jesus, Our Lord and Savior. But it is necessary to invoke His Name with a full and unwavering faith-with a deep certainty that He is near, sees and hears, pays whole-hearted attention to our petition, and is ready to fulfill it and to grant what we seek. There is nothing to be ashamed of in such a hope. If fulfillment is sometimes delayed, this may be because the petitioner is still not yet ready to receive what he asks.

Not a talisman

The Jesus Prayer is not some talisman. Its power comes from faith in the Lord, and from a deep union of the mind and heart with Him. With such a disposition, the invocation of the Lord's Name becomes very effective in many ways. But a mere repetition of the words does not signify anything.

Mechanical repetition leads to nothing

Do not forget that you must not limit yourself to a mechanical repetition of the words of the Jesus Prayer. This will lead to nothing except a habit of repeating the prayer automatically with the tongue, without even thinking about it. There is of course nothing wrong in this, but it constitutes only the extreme outer limit of the work.

The essential thing is to stand consciously in the presence of the Lord, with fear, faith and love.

Oral and inner prayer

One can recite the Jesus Prayer with the mind in the heart without movement of the tongue. This is better than oral prayer. Use oral prayer as a support to inner prayer. Sometimes It is required in order to strengthen inner prayer.

Avoid visual concepts

Hold no intermediate image between the mind and the Lord when practicing the Jesus Prayer. The words pronounced are merely a help, and are not essential. The principal thing is to stand before the Lord with the mind in the heart. This, and not the words, is inner spiritual prayer. The words here are as much or as little the essential part of the prayer as the words of any other prayer. 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 inner being must not be accompanied by any visual concept, but must be confined to a simple conviction or feeling. A man in a warm room feels how the warmth envelops and penetrates him. The same must be the effect on our spiritual nature of the all-encompassing presence of God, who is the fire in the room of our being.

The words 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me' are only the instrument and not the essence of the work; but they are an instrument which is very strong and effective, for the Name of the Lord Jesus is fearful to the enemies of our salvation and a blessing to all who seek Him. Do not forget that this practice is simple, and must not have anything fanciful about it. Pray about everything to the Lord, to our most pure Lady, to your Guardian Angel; and they will teach you everything, either directly or through others.

Images and illusion

In order not to fall into illusion, while practicing inner prayer, do not permit yourself any concepts, images, or visions. For vivid imaginings, darting to and fro, and flights of fancy

do not cease even when the mind stands in the heart and recites prayer: and 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.

Dispel all images from your mind

You ask about prayer. I find in the writings of the Holy Fathers, that when you pray you must dispel all images from your mind. That is what I also try to do, forcing myself to realize that God is everywhere-and so (among other places) here, where my thoughts and feelings are. I cannot succeed in freeing myself entirely from images, but gradually they evaporate more and more. There comes a point when they disappear completely.

Excerpted for the *Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, comp by Igumen Charion of Valamo, trans E, Kadloubovsky & E. M. Palmer, Faber and Faber, 1966, pp 92-101
Be sure to include this book in your spiritual library.