

A practical spiritual catechism from Mt. Athos

Keep your focus just on Christ. Live under guidance in the Church.

This is for Orthodox Christians who are serious, try, but still lack a clear, fruitful, day to day path to Christ. They feel overwhelmed by information. Pulled from Christ in daily life. Weighed down by struggles hard to shake. If this is you, it is not that you don't care. Or that you don't try hard enough. You may just be on the "adding-more" path. Many saints went the other way: with a guide, they focused just on Christ. One shift gives a clear path in two steps. As St. Hesychios, St. Gregory of Sinai, and others teach, this shift fulfills all the Commandments. It is a path of obedience in the Church. In other words, it is not new. It is the path of our Fathers, put clearly for the needs of today's people. "The essence of the commandments is always to give precedence to the one that embraces them all: mindfulness of God" – St. Gregory of Sinai.

The path in three simple lines

- 1. Many serious Orthodox Christians stay stuck. Why? They try to add more to go deeper.*
- 2. Many saints went the other way: under a guide, they focused just on Christ. As St. Hesychios and many of our Fathers teach, this fulfills all the Commandments.*
- 3. If you bring your focus back to Christ even once today, you have begun.*

You don't have to read all this at once. Page 2 is the whole path in seed form. Start there.

These pages, apart from notes, give the words of Bp. Emilianos on this two step path. He learned it over his ten years with Elder Aimilianos of Mt. Athos, and fourteen on Mt. Athos in all. Elder Aimilianos helped rebuild Mt. Athos. It is the 1,000-year heart of our spiritual life.

*To walk this, you need to see how, bit by bit. First is the core of this path. Then definitions, fruits and markers. Then both steps piece by piece. **Then words from the Fathers on this path.** You do not have to put this in order yourself. Questions are laid out how they often come up in life.*

Some often seen in Q&As: "What about dry prayer?" "How to ignore thoughts?" "How to heal my soul?" "How to find and work with a spiritual father?" You can also search for your specific ones.

Many share early fruit: *more rest from bad thoughts. More discernment. More clarity of mind in prayer. See pages 8-10 for more. Still, this isn't automatic. It is not always the same for each. One story: "In six months, bishops told me they can see the change from how he walks."*

This is to be lived with help from a priest. To help your priest, confession, and parish life. Not replace it. *For priests and parish leaders: many want depth, but your time is pressed. There is too much unsafe advice with no accountability. You need clear, safe resources. Our heart is to help lift some of this weight. You may find it best to start people on pp. 2-7. Then the rest slowly.*

You do not need more. You need to work just on what counts. You can stop trying to do everything at once. Read “How can I start today?”. It is the core. Read the rest slowly. Do this path with a blessing. Bring questions to your priest. If what you did before did not make you whole in Christ, it may be the wrong path for you. If this catechism clarified why you’ve been stuck, pass it to one Orthodox Christian who may benefit. You can share using the link below. But if you feel something is missing, please email elderaimilianos@gmail.com. Every part in this responds to real comments from a real Orthodox Christian. (This is now version 2.)

If you want more depth, learn more at bit.ly/focusonChrist. Start with the book Walking on the Waves. Add your name to the email list for monthly updates with more like this.

Or, if your Orthodox Christian group has questions, you can ask for a free live Q&A with Bp. Emilianos at that link. They are often 1-2 hours. 10–100+ people is fine. Zoom or in person can work. You will get a reply within 3 days. You will also receive a group kit to help you use this. We often record Q&As to help others and send it to the email list. (Find past parish and group Q&As at youtube.com/@TheFountainOfLight.) They also build new versions of this catechism, and books. We won’t if you don’t wish. Live Q&A is meant to help local pastoral care. Not replace it.

“How can I start today?”

A young person wants God. He tries to do what is right. The list grows. But his heart is dry. He starts to think: “Maybe I will not change. Maybe I will not find Christ.” He grows very tired.

Once, there was a child who was taught how to be a perfect Christian. He was told what he should do. He was told what he shouldn’t do. He got stories from history. He got stories from the Saints. But he was sad. He could not even recall all the things he had to do. Much less do them.

They told him they would summarize it. This made him happy. He learned it by heart. He set out to do it all. Years went by. But he still could not keep all the rules they gave him. He tried hard. Still he could not do it. He came to think that this life was for someone else, not for him.

He went to his spiritual father. He said: “Father, I can’t do all these things. There are so many little rules. I’m so tired. Do you have something easier?”

He told him: **“Do not let your focus go away from God. When it drifts, bring it back to God. So, if you’re in pain, don’t say, “I’m in pain.” Don’t think about it. Your attention will move from God. Your attention should just stay on God.”** (Get help if you need, of course.)

The young man thought it would not be too hard to do just this one thing. Two years went by. But then he saw a strange thing. **He had just done the one thing his father in God had told him.**

But he had in fact done all the rest too. All the things he once tried to do, but could not do. He did them by just one thing: he kept his focus on God.

He thought of the fear he had felt at first, when he saw that long list of things to do. Now he read the list. It was all done. Yet he had not set out, one by one, to do each of them.

Once you get the essence, once you find God, all the rest works out on its own.

Note: If this story speaks to your heart, do not add more. Do one small step in peace. Today, if you see your focus drift? Bring it back to Christ. Do it once. Then once more. Just 2%. That is how this starts.

From here on, you will see questions answered in order they often come up:

- 1) *First, the two steps in plain words. (pp. 3-6)*
- 2) *What this is and isn't. So it stays safe, and Church-led. (p. 7)*
- 3) **What “focus on Christ” means in real life. (pp. 8)**
- 4) *The fruits and markers of this path. (pp. 9-12)*
- 5) *One part that goes through “Step 1: Keep Focus on Christ” bit by bit. (pp. 12-50)*
- 6) *One part that goes through “Step 2: Live under Guidance” bit by bit. (pp. 51-63)*
- 7) *The key points again, and words from the Fathers on this path. (pp. 64-70)*

The two steps in plain words

Step #1. For an Orthodox Christian, always keep your focus just on Christ.

If you drift? Go back to Christ.

So you are in the kitchen. The day is loud. A thought comes. Or fear. Or strife. A pull to sin. Your thoughts start to run. **Go back to Christ.** Then move on.

“Focus on Christ” is familiar advice. But here’s what everyone misses: **it also means do not focus on all that is not God, good or bad.**

Not your sins. Not your virtues. Not your passions.¹

Not your wins. Not hard things. Not your falls. Not your thoughts. Not your pain. Not your pulls to sin. Not that you can’t focus on Christ. *Not anything else.*

In place of all this, keep a still, firm focus just on Christ. And when you lose it? Go back to Christ. It grows bit by bit with time. It is “the one thing needful.” In time, it heals all. In time, it brings us God Himself.

¹ **Passions:** The short version is they are energies of the soul, such as desire or anger, that are joined to thoughts rather than God in the heart. They create automatic behavior. Because the thoughts serve as replacements for God, by focusing on God, the heart receives its true food. The thoughts that try to replace Him begin to die.

Even the Jesus Prayer² is not the same thing if it turns into the goal. It is a tool. Its job is to keep your focus on Christ.

All this at 80%. Do not push too far past your limits. Save strength for your trials. Even 2% is more than 0%. It builds up with time.

Normal, chosen thinking for day to day life is fine. The harm is in bad thoughts that break in all day long. And all thoughts, in prayer.

As soon as you start to keep your focus just on Christ, you make progress. Even if it is a small start. Progress builds up as you keep at it.

Early fruit is often more peace of mind. More rest from bad thoughts. A more clear mind in day to day judgment. A more clear mind in prayer. (And more than that as well.)

Many Fathers teach that this fulfills all the commandments. This is not a new idea. Think of St. Porphyrios. St. Sophrony. St. Gregory of Sinai. St. Mark the Ascetic. (St. Porphyrios, when asked how to be holy: “It’s very simple. Just think about God all the time.” For more, please see the note below.³ Also see the “Quotes” at the end.)

Why? Because the root of sin is self-love. Self-love is to focus on oneself. To focus on Christ, and not yourself, heals self-love. (You should still fulfill your needs, of course.)

² **Jesus Prayer:** The prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” Or variants of that. The words are simply to keep one’s focus on God.

³ **“Watchfulness is the doer of every commandment in the Old and the New Testament; and the giver of every blessing in the life to come.” – St. Hesychios in the Philokalia**

“The essence of the commandments is always to give precedence to the one that embraces them all: mindfulness of God.” – St. Gregory of Sinai, in the Philokalia

“Keep your mind fixed firmly on God.” – St. Sophrony of Essex’s answer when asked the essence of spiritual life.

“The work of watchfulness gave [the Fathers] purity of heart.” – Elder Ephraim of Arizona.

“Without unceasing mindfulness of the Lord, which gives rise to purity, free from every evil, in the heart as well as in the intellect, it is impossible to bear fruit: Without me, it says, you can do nothing.” – St. Nikodemos of Mt. Athos

“Inner prayer...is the most direct road to salvation.” – St. Theophan the Recluse

“The Fathers abandoned all other forms of spiritual labor and concentrated wholly on this one task...It is impossible to acquire all the other virtues except through watchfulness.” – St. Symeon the New Theologian, in the Philokalia.

“Prayer is called a virtue, but in reality it is the mother of the virtues: for it gives birth to them through union with Christ.” – St. Mark the Ascetic, in the Philokalia

And then through this with time you find the grace of God⁴ in your heart.⁵ As this grows, it leads to union with God.⁶ So the love of God, the first commandment, is done more and more. This lets you have true love for all.

And with all this God's will is done in your life.

Step #2. Do not walk this path without a guide. But you do not need a “perfect elder” to start in a safe way. A good confessor, after prayer and with humility, or a spiritual father, can guide you well enough to start.⁷ If you do not yet have the right help, pp. 53-57 speak on how to find one.

This person must not be a tyrant. You should be able to open your heart with ease. Their aim should be to make you one with Christ. Not one with themselves.

You should feel free with them. They should help you grow up in the spiritual life. They should have the skill and the years to help you do that.

Through this bond, you can inherit your spiritual father's grace. That means you receive God Himself through that bond. This is not a tie to a person. It is a mystery of life in Christ in the Church.

⁴ **Grace:** Many go into an Orthodox Church and say how different the energy is there. This energy is the grace of God. This is also the presence of God.

The fullness of God's energy, or grace, or presence, can be unearthed in the heart of an Orthodox Christian. That's because it is placed there in its entirety through the sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation.

It is covered over by selfishness and thoughts. The ascetic life is the work of uncovering and uniting with it to greater and greater degrees. This is what is shown here.

⁵ **The heart/the spiritual heart:** People pray with the Jesus prayer. At some point, they have the feeling of their heart. It's not this (physical) heart that works and if it stops we're dead. It's the spiritual heart, which is found in the physical heart. It's the center of their existence. In practice this is found through experience.

⁶ **Union with God:** to the extent that grace of God and the heart become one, to that extent there is union with God.

⁷ **A confessor, spiritual father, or elder:** In short, this is a guide who has walked the spiritual path of uncovering God in their heart. At least to some degree. And, who is able to guide others to do the same.

More deeply, it should be said that the terms are used somewhat the same here. But in practice they are not the same. A confessor is usually a parish priest who hears your confession. If you pray with faith and innocence for God's will beforehand, he can often give true guidance there. A spiritual father is a deeper and more personal bond. Almost like a personal coach. They are usually advanced enough in prayer and grace to speak into your life in a regular way. An Elder has gone farther still. They truly reveal the will of God to others. Because of that much greater obedience is given to an Elder. Such are rare. Bp. Emiliano does not mean you must wait for an Elder before you start. He means you should look for one, while knowing that a good confessor, after prayer, or a spiritual father can still guide you correctly enough to start. And this search should not be a cause for instability.

These two steps go together. Each needs the other. Together, they are the most safe and sure way to find Christ in your heart and have Him in your daily life.

Many of the Fathers spoke on this. This is why the path is safe. It is not a private thought. It is the mind of the Fathers, lived in the Church. **This text tries to bring that full depth to English speakers. So Orthodox Christians can move from conflicting advice to firm peace in Christ.** Quotes from the Fathers are at the end.

If adding more has not made you whole in Christ, this is why. It is the wrong path. The straight path is plain, but it gets you there. Keep your focus just on Christ. Live under guidance in the Church.

The path in three simple lines

- 1) Many serious Orthodox Christians stay stuck. Why? They try to add more to go deeper.
- 2) Many saints went the other way: under a guide, they focused just on Christ. As St. Hesychios and many of our Fathers teach, this fulfills all the Commandments.
- 3) If you go back to Christ even once today, you have begun.

Many questions do come up. Next, we give some guardrails for this path.



Elder Aimilianos of Mt. Athos

What this is. What it is not.

This is a guide for Orthodox Christians who want to go deeper in normal Church life. It goes with prayer, confession, and the sacraments. With a life of love and work. It is not an independent program. **This path must be lived with discernment. With peace. With the blessing of your spiritual father.**

If pride, naivety, scrupulosity, trauma, or psychological problems are strong? Then guidance is an absolute must. (Though it always is.) Growth may need to be slower.

This is not a stand in for your priest or your parish. It is not a trick that works without the Church. It is not a cause to chase signs. To gather endless tips. Or to try the spiritual life all on your own. God forbid. **Live all this with blessing and trust in the Church.**

A note on repentance

“Focus on Christ” does not mean you act as if sin is not there. It does not mean you skip confession. It means you do not try to heal your soul by staring at yourself. You confess. You struggle. But the struggle is towards Christ. You do not heal your soul by self-fix.

If you fall, do not panic. Confess it in a clear way. Get up. Bring your focus back to Christ. **You do not become holy with your eyes on you. You become holy by your focus on Christ.** Next, we discuss how to focus on Christ.



Simonopetra Monastery on Mt. Athos. This is where Elder Aimilianos and Bp. Emilianos lived.

How to focus on Christ?

If you want to start keeping your focus on Christ, then saying, ‘God, I love You,’ or ‘God, You are great,’ is not the way to go. If you spend your time trying to find the right words, you waste your energy. Your focus is on what to say next.

The best way to do this is the Jesus Prayer. At least to start. “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It needs a different approach. You focus solely on the words. You do not let your focus go anywhere else.

This does not mean to focus on understanding what each word means.

It means just keep your focus on the words without thinking anything.

Of course, you have to reject all thoughts and silence your mind to pray. But the focus is prayer. When the focus is prayer and not silence, you can pray even in the midst of a thunderstorm.

There are also those who no longer need the Jesus Prayer to connect with God.

They have a deep familiarity with this connection. This is after years of watchfulness,⁸ self-emptying,⁹ and prayer. But then it’s like they can flip a switch. For them to find God’s Presence – grace – in their heart is simple. To seek His Enlightenment on a hard case is simple. It’s like they turn on a light.

So when we say “focus on Christ” we mean the Jesus Prayer at first. Ignoring all intrusive thoughts and distractions during the day. And all of it, in prayer. Later, confirmed by your spiritual father, we mean the other. The point of the Jesus Prayer is to find the grace of God in your heart. As this grows, it becomes union with God more and more.

These are not different paths. They are different stages of the same movement: keeping your focus just on Christ. At first through the Jesus Prayer. Later, on the grace of God in your heart. As this grows, it becomes union more and more. The words to talk about it change because the prayer deepens. But the goal is the same: keep your focus just on Christ. Next, we discuss the fruits of this path and its milestones.

⁸ **Watchfulness (nepsis in Greek):** the strict definition is simply keeping one’s attention, one’s focus, free from thoughts. **In practice it always goes with prayer – so continuous focus just on God without thoughts or distractions. Bringing your focus back each time it goes off.** In this example, and often in this document (and elsewhere), it is used in this second way.

⁹ **Self-emptying:** The key to a safe spiritual life. Emptying the heart from thoughts via watchfulness, taking up one’s cross, self-sacrifice, obedience, and any other practice that increases humility.

What are its fruits?

It was not Christ Who was transfigured. Christ was always glorious. But His Apostles, they could never see it. They could never sense it. They could never experience it.

Because they were using their human eyes. But their human eyes were not enough. **What happened at the Transfiguration was that the Apostles' eyes were transfigured.**

It's like their spiritual eyes opened. They managed to see the glory of God. **This is what happens with us as well, if we cultivate watchfulness.**

The human being can become like Paradise itself. Like Heaven. But for this to happen, you must live a life of prayer. If you don't try to connect with God, how will He find common ground to come into your life? He won't.

Why did the Saints become Saints? Because they managed to focus on Christ, on God, on the Holy Trinity. And through this focus, they made God present in their lives.

Elder Aimilianos gives an example of a common concern. "If I were to die right now, how would God judge me? What should I do?"

Should I make a list of everything I need to fulfill? Charity? Humility? A clean heart? The Gospel says the pure of heart will see God. **But how can I possibly achieve all this? It's too much!"**

Elder Aimilianos gives the answer. He emphasizes the importance of one single thing. Watchfulness.

"If you focus on this one thing – keeping your focus on Christ – everything else will follow. Don't worry about how to achieve every virtue. Don't write lists of all the things you need to do.

God will grant you these virtues when the time is right. He'll do it if you persist in your practice of watchfulness."

He describes a condition that arises in a person who begins practicing this. "In the past, I would feel love for Christ one day.

But by the next, that love would grow cold. Or, I would be filled with excitement one day. But by the next, I would be in tears.

Now, I see that my state has changed. I am stable. I simply love Christ."

Examples of this fruit today

(We do not chase experiences or fruit. We focus on Christ. But this shows potential fruit from a steady focus on Christ under a life of guidance.)

It doesn't matter if you're married or not. It doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't matter what character¹⁰ you've got. None of it matters as long as you try to do this.

I have a spiritual child. We talked about this. He started praying each morning. He took it seriously.

Within six months, I had some comments from some bishops. (He's a clergyman.) They told me they can even see the change in him from the way he walks.

And you don't walk in a new way on purpose. But it means that your whole existence starts to be more spiritual.

And these are just the side effects. But they are good side effects.

More than one person has told me the following. I don't know if they were praying or not. But they were with a lot of people.

All of the sudden things changed around them. They felt an unconditional love for everyone who was there. This is God there. This is a taste of how God loves us.

Another story goes like this. This person was praying. He had a tiny bit of holy relic with him. He was practicing the Jesus prayer.

He felt something which is not a big deal. But at the same time it is. He felt the wings of the Holy Spirit on his heart. You can't understand it.

And then the presence of the Holy Spirit gave him a very specific understanding.

He understood that inside this tiny bit of holy relic there was the whole of the Holy Trinity.

I can tell you that there are very, very spiritual lay people. Lay people who have a greater spiritual level than monks and nuns that were in the monastery for 50 years.

And I'm talking about people I know today in Brisbane, Australia. These are lay people who have families.

¹⁰ **Character:** Here meaning the personality traits that remain largely fixed through life and can be used for good or ill. For instance, to have a lot of intensity can be bad if directed against other people, but good when directed to God.

If they can get there, we can get there too. And this means that you should not give up praying. We all start from somewhere.

The harm of not finding Christ

Without this Communion with God, we may achieve many things outwardly. But, we will fail in the true purpose of our lives. We will not be One with Him.

This life is the only opportunity we have to unite with God for all eternity. If we miss this chance, it is lost forever.

What changes over time?

According to Elder Aimilianos' explanation of St. Hesychios,¹¹ the steps of watchfulness are:

1. We begin practicing this.
2. Over time, it becomes a good habit.
3. With the Grace of God, it grows to be more frequent and consistent.
4. We then can peacefully observe the inner spiritual war within our intellect.¹²

¹¹ **St. Hesychios:** a saint who wrote down much on prayer and watchfulness.

¹²**Inner spiritual war within our intellect:** In short, when a person begins to go inward, they discover the power of thoughts. What matters is this: do not give it strength. **Go back to Christ**, and let it pass.

More deeply, thoughts have sources. Demons. Our past. The environment, etc. But it is usually not helpful to search out where a thought came from.

If we feed a thought, it sets off a chain. A small, imageless piece of energy in the heart distracts us. (The Fathers call it a logismos.) Then it may offer a little pleasure. Then it forms an image. A fantasy on the screen of the mind. Then it begins to persuade us toward an action. After that comes assent (agreeing inwardly). Then the act outwardly. Often the fantasy is far from what the fruits of an act really would be.

When this repeats a rut forms in the soul. Especially when it is carried into action. It becomes more automatic each time. This automatic reaction to a thought is what the Fathers call a passion.

Under the guidance of a spiritual father, this war is fought first by pushing sin out of actions. Then by cutting off the thoughts that cause sin earlier and earlier. In time by cleansing the heart itself of stored thoughts. The heart is the center of the person. Thoughts we accept are kept there. They cover and

5. This leads to prayer deepening and developing into a sweet, peaceful state of mind.

6. Finally, we arrive at a Christ-like condition – union with Christ.

Purification¹³ may not be a specific step. But, it develops naturally throughout this process.

Next, we speak on the questions that come up with focus on Christ.



Step 1. Keep Focus on Christ.

A Short Story

Let's say you're a captain trying to steer a boat. A spiritual boat. Be it your mind, your family, your children, your spouse. Or your environment. Or your Church.

distort the person as made by God. This is like the "subconscious," but deeper. Thoughts stored in the heart fundamentally offer a substitute for God.

For this reason, what finally frees a person is not technique, but grace – God Himself. **And this war has a positive character: in practice it is done by moving toward Christ, not by staring at evil.**

¹³ **Purification:** the process of freeing the heart from thoughts so that it reveals and is filled with God.

You have to ensure a smooth spiritual passage for all aboard. **You do not fight the thunder. You do not fight the waves.** Instead, you follow the Holy Spirit. Experience the Presence of God. Focus there.

Interlock your intellect with the Vision ahead. That's all you need to do. God will handle the rest. You cannot govern the boat through storms by yourself.

You can't stop the rain. If you get upset about that, you will lose your peace. You will lose your focus in life.

Your concern should be to focus on God. God will take care of all the rest.

What is the key shift?

You don't focus on fighting the passions. You focus on finding God and your inner peace.

I cannot have repentance by focusing on my sins. I cannot have repentance by focusing on my past. I cannot have repentance by focusing on my passions. I cannot have repentance by focusing on my weaknesses. I cannot have repentance by focusing on my misery.

All these are different expressions of my self-centeredness. I will end up like a tied up donkey going around in circles. I'll only find myself tied up tighter. **I have repentance by focusing on God.**

Why focus on the dirt of your heart when only God can fix it? What can you do about the dirt of your heart?

You see that all the time you try to fight anger. There is still anger there. You fight jealousy. There is still jealousy there. You fight whatever bothers you. All these thoughts. They're still there. Why focus on this when you can't change it?

Focus on God. When you go closer to God, these things will disappear. In what sense? Let's say it's very dark. I can't see in front of me. But I switch on the light. The darkness disappears.

Elder Aimilianos tells us: **"Once we focus on God with watchfulness we prove that we love God.**

If we were to rely on ourselves and use our own powers to be saved, our struggle will be human. We will indeed struggle."

It's like Jesus said to the Apostle Peter. "Do you want to walk on the waves? Focus on Me. Then you will do it. That's it, nothing else. Just focus on Me.

This one thing is enough to get you from this life to the next. You don't need anything else." This is watchfulness. This is the one thing.

Saint Hesychios of the Philokalia says that "watchfulness fulfills God's Will." Once you follow this path, God's Will will be done in your life.

Sometimes we ask: "What is God's Will? What does God want from us?" But God is not an enigma. He is not something obscure that we can't find. In fact, He is very clear.

We should know exactly Who He is.

What we're trying to teach is how to cultivate a specific kind of prayer. A continuous focus on God while ignoring thoughts and all distractions. (Noetic prayer or the Jesus prayer.)

Through this you get a real, living, existential connection with the living God in your heart.¹⁴

By practicing this, which is watchfulness, we essentially fulfill all the commandments. Both those of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament.

Our goal is not dispassion.¹⁵ It's not discernment or foresight. It's not any other specific gift.

Our goal is to draw nearer to God and become One with Him. In fact, our goal is not even to do God's Will. Our One and Only Goal should be God Himself.

When God comes, He brings everything you need along with Him. All of the above. And it's perfectly tailored to benefit us and those around us.

These come not because you sought them. They come because you sought Him.

If we were to achieve This, we would attain dispassion. It might not be constant. Temptations may still come and go. But that's not what matters.

¹⁴ **Ontological/Existential Connection:** in the Fall, man, as it were, ripped the grace of God out of his heart. This is the catastrophe that led to everything else. Since then, man wanders the earth searching for what he lost. He tries to fill the existential hole in his being, his heart. Often without realizing it. In baptism, the grace of God is once again introduced to the heart. God lives there, but secretly. His grace is covered over by passions – selfishness, thoughts, and the like. To the extent these are cleared out, to that extent the existential connection with God that was given in baptism is lived by the person consciously. **One meets the living God. One lives with Him.**

¹⁵ **Dispassion:** the more the living God grows in your heart, the more He transfigures the powers of your soul so that they are directed to Him within the heart. Not to external things. One becomes less and less reactive to external things. Less and less caught up in automatic chain reactions. More free from them. The extent to which this happens is the extent of dispassion.

What matters is that we know how to activate the Connection. We know how to "flick the switch" for the Light to come.

Meaning, you know where and how to place your nous¹⁶ to Commune with God. That's what truly counts.

Sometimes we think it's impossible to reach the heights of our Church Fathers and Mothers. But it is not. This is the purpose for which we were created.

In fact, if we do not achieve this, we fall short of our calling. We have failed.

God did not create us to be nothing nor does He make mistakes. God created us to attain His Image and Likeness.¹⁷ To become gods by Grace.¹⁸

Even those with families and demanding jobs can achieve these spiritual heights.

By utilizing watchfulness one follows the fastest path to Deification.¹⁹

What is the summary?

Do this

- Keep your focus just on Christ, on the Jesus Prayer.
- When you drift, return just to Christ, to the Jesus Prayer.

Don't do this

- Don't engage thoughts. Ignore them by focusing just on Christ, on the Jesus prayer. (Even "good" thoughts). Unless you're consciously, voluntarily thinking through something.
- Don't measure your progress. Don't check spiritual experiences on your own. Bring them to your guide.

¹⁶ **Nous:** It is a common experience to be thinking something, but then have one's attention wander off. This illustrates the difference between thinking (the rational mind) and attention (nous).

The nous, one's attention, can be either focused or unfocused. It is a key point to free the nous, the attention, from being welded to the rational mind and thinking and bring it down to the heart. This is its natural state. There it encounters God, in the baptized Orthodox Christian. This must be done under the guidance of a spiritual father.

¹⁷ **Image and likeness:** All humans are made in the image of God. But, to grow into the likeness of God is the result of the process we are describing here.

¹⁸ **Gods by grace:** please see "Union with Christ."

¹⁹ **Deification:** please see "Union with Christ."

- Don't do things that make you lose your peace.
- Don't push your limits more than you can handle.

If you fail

- Don't panic.
- Don't restart the whole day.
- Just return to Christ again.

Recap

- Focus just on Christ, on the Jesus Prayer.
- Lose focus? Return just to Christ, to the Jesus Prayer.
- Repeat quietly.

Some major questions in this section:

- How to find Christ in prayer?
- How to focus when busy?
- How to ignore thoughts?
- What to do if I can't ignore them?
- What are good and bad thoughts?
- How to approach mistakes, obstacles, and problems spiritually?
- How to heal inwardly?
- How hard to push in spiritual life?
- How to be humble, and what's the difference between healthy and false humility?
- How to find your path in life?

Beginner-safe

How to start a prayer rule

Saint Hesychios says: "If you can't achieve watchfulness, at least start with a prayer rule."

A prayer rule is not just for monastics. It's for everyone. It's for people who live in the world, who have families. For people who work, have jobs, and lead busy lives. **It's the most important part of our daily routine.**

What should your personal prayer rule look like? It depends on the blessing you receive from your spiritual father.

Your prayer rule might include ten to fifteen minutes of saying the Jesus Prayer with a prayer rope. It can be a reading from the Old or New Testaments. Possibly a spiritual book. It may also involve physical actions like prostrations.

It depends on the blessing you receive. It can be a combination of these performed in a specific order. Or, for a certain length of time. It all depends on your guidance by your spiritual father.

Your prayer rule is either for the morning or before bed. It depends on when your nous is clearest. When it's the most focused. It also depends on when you can best find a quiet, uninterrupted time to dedicate to God each day.

For example, if you need to get children ready for school in the morning, you might find that evenings work better. If you choose to pray in the morning, then your nous, upon waking, should go straight to God.

Ideally, your prayer rule should be done at about the same time each day. Except in those cases that need flexibility.

For example, someone who works shift hours. A nurse, for instance. They might need to pray at different times depending on their shift.

But, someone with a 9-to-5 job can typically pray at the same time each day. Before work, or before bed. **It should be considerably consistent each day.**

This time is sacred and belongs only to God. Prayer is what can bring God to where we are. It can make us One with Him.

“What if I get distracted?”

In your prayer rule, once you realize that you're distracted, start from the beginning. Try to concentrate again on the words of the prayer.

Over time you realize quicker and quicker that you are distracted. Then, you go back to trying to focus. The thoughts will usually become less and less over time if you ignore them.

How to be more focused?

The grace of God makes your watchfulness more of a habit. And then it's easier and easier. I guess it's similar when it comes to focusing on other things.

Someone who doesn't usually read, if they were to read for an hour straight, they won't make it. But you start from 10 minutes. Then you go to 15. Then you go to 20. **The same with everything.**

Using a prayer rope?

Every time you go through a knot, you say the Jesus Prayer once. And the prayer rope is a tool. The Jesus Prayer is what matters.

So the prayer rope is like a "small distraction." But it helps us be distracted less.

And I would say that if you use a prayer rope in church? Use one that is small. That's because when someone sees you with a huge prayer rope in the church, it's destructive for them.

They don't want that. But they will judge you. **So be discreet when you use a prayer rope. You don't need to show it.**

And of course, you don't need the prayer rope to say the Jesus Prayer. It's just that it helps.

Posture during prayer?

If someone is sleepy he can stand up and say the Jesus prayer. If someone has a special moment, they can fall on his or her knees and say the Jesus prayer.

But if you want to grow your connection with God, Elder Aimilianos suggests the following. He says to sit somewhere in a small stool or even in a chair.

It should be not too comfortable, not too uncomfortable. If you're too comfortable, you might fall asleep. If you are too uncomfortable this can also be a distraction.

That's how you grow the Prayer. That's the best way to get used to prayer without distraction. This way your posture will not distract you.

What about techniques?

Elder Aimilianos spoke about this. He spoke about a little kid that doesn't know about prayer techniques but has love. This kid will go way further in prayer than someone who does what the Fathers say about techniques.

It's not about the letter of the law. It's about the depths of your heart. For example, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

The tax collector prayed the right way and the Pharisee prayed the wrong way. It's not about the type of prayer. It's not about the amount of prayer. It's about your heart.

How to find Christ?

You don't need to go up to heaven to find God. You will find God inside your heart.

When we talk about prayer here, we do not talk about prayer for specific things. We talk about prayer where I'm on one side. God is on the other side. We want to become one.

So it has nothing to do with what I want from life. It has nothing to do with what I've done wrong. It has nothing to do with anything else.

This is the prayer which talks about how do I become one with God. The only focus is God.

I struggle with God, for God. Not for something that I want. So I ask God to give me Himself. "Ask" is an order. "Ask, and ye shall receive." God is telling us what to do.

It's an order – ask. If you want to receive ask. If you don't ask, you will receive nothing. Not nothing, but you know what I mean.

I push myself. I struggle to make God mine. But I'm not praying for something that puts a question mark on "Is what I'm praying for according to God's will or not?"

The force that God has given you, you aim all of it towards God. And pretty much your attitude is that, "I'm not getting off the seat until You present Yourself."

And then by this process you're showing that, "God, I want You."

Elder Aimilianos wouldn't take no for an answer from God. He wouldn't. But if you're not such a person, you waste your life.

You cannot bring God in your family. You cannot bring God in your soul. You cannot bring God to others.

But if you are such a person and you don't take no for an answer, God will say yes. He created us to say yes. It's just that we need to prove that we love Him.

It's not in a brutal way. It's in a loving way. It's just that you love God so much that you can't just give up.

Let's say you're a mother. Something happens with one of your kids. You will demand from God for what you want. You will demand it.

Your prayers, they will not be like, "Please God, if you want." This is what it is. This is your love. You can't do anything else. **But this is how much God wants us to love Him.**

It's as if your soul is your only son or your only daughter. It's about to die. And so you struggle with all your strength to save your soul. With all your energy.

This is what prayer has to feel like. Because this is how much you should prove to God that you love Him. Then He will do what you ask for.

Elder Aimilianos says that all this has to be done with a lot of humility. If you do not have humility, you will never get to these results.

Why is there a struggle?

If God were to surrender to us immediately, we'd cast Him off as easily as we found Him. We would not have understood His true value.

Dryness in prayer?

Sometimes, periods of 'dryness' in our prayer can actually be opportunities. They're chances to prove how much we love and want God.

It's not that God needs proof. He already knows our hearts better than we do. But He cannot resist a sacrificial spirit. A spirit that keeps reaching for Him despite the challenges.

When you offer that to Him, He responds. And He doesn't just restore what you had before. He often gives you something even more.

He gives Himself in greater measure, as a Gift. **This leads to spiritual development.**

"I'm making no progress"

You think that nothing happens. But if you were to look in the mirror each day, you also won't see much change.

But let's say you were to just look at yourself once a year. You will see a lot of change.

So what I'm telling you is that you don't see how much you grow. But you do grow.

Then a few years down the track, you will look back. Those things from a few years back, they don't exist anymore.

And this is because you're more mature. You're above all these problems that you had in the past. They don't bother you anymore. But it takes time.

The thing is, as we said before, you should not compare yourself with others. You should not compare yourself with the saints. You should not compare yourself with yourself.

You do your best every instant. And then you leave yourself in God's hands.

When your heart will mature, then you will see God's blessing. The blessings fall like a thunderstorm, like all together. So it does work, if you keep trying.

But if you don't get through it, you will get nowhere.

What about dreams?

You need to be cautious with dreams because they are an easy route for the devil to trick us.

That's why it's essential to have an experienced spiritual father.

If something like this happens, you should simply tell your spiritual father. You say, "This is what I experienced." Then leave it in God's Hands.

Even if the dream is real, it does not mean you need to act on it. If God wants something to happen, it will.

Evaluating experiences?

You need a spiritual father. If you don't, you won't know.

Let's say you're asked to stay at a house while the owner is away. You don't open the door to strangers. If you don't, the owner will appreciate your work to keep the house safe.

But let's say you open the door. The house is vandalized. Won't the owner be upset? This analogy applies to your spiritual life. **It's always safer to keep the doors of your heart shut. It doesn't matter who is knocking.**

If it is God knocking, He will come again in a different form. He will fill your heart with love and humility. Joy and happiness. The devil does not have these.

The experiences the devil gives are harsh and unsettling. They create anxiety. They make you proud. They make you want others to notice you.

You can tell a tree by its fruit. And usually it's very clear. You hear people saying that an Angel delivered them a message. They need to tell a certain person this message.

In my opinion, it's all rubbish. It could be a psychological or spiritual experience. Either way, it's from evil spirits.

Are you consciously deceiving others? Showing-off for your own purposes? Allowing the tempter to inflate your ego? If so, you have fallen into delusion.

If someone is humble, they will understand that even if an experience is from God, it's not something to brag about. You move on.

Evaluating progress?

You should never compare yourself to others or even to yourself.

Leave your judgment to your spiritual father. Don't judge yourselves.

Otherwise, if you find yourself better than before? You might get proud. If you find yourself worse than before? You might get depressed. So just don't. Leave the judgment to God.

If you come to terms with who you are, that you are nothing, what are you going to judge? You can't judge anything.

Everything we have is from God. If we are nothing, we can't be more or less nothing.

Is this done all the time?

Practicing watchfulness is like walking the narrow path. What do we mean by narrow path? It's to narrow your mind to focus on one thing: the Jesus Prayer.

Both watchfulness and prayer must be continuous through the day. Not once-off or just for your time of prayer. Otherwise you won't get far.

Elder Aimilianos uses an example and says: "Some monks in the monastery have their duty to make bread. They start making bread. An earthquake suddenly happens.

They get scared. They run outside. There is a lot of talk about the earthquake. Some say, "We should do a Blessing of the Water Service." Others say, "We should chant a Supplicatory Canon."

And after one, two, or three hours, they go back to the bakery. But it's too late for the bread. It's destroyed. They have to start from the beginning.

This is what happens with watchfulness. You can't give it up for a period of time and then start where you left off. If you give it up you have to start from scratch.

That's why once you start, you should stay there. This is how it grows and develops. This is how you also grow spiritually."

How to focus when busy?

Saint Sophrony²⁰ gave this advice to a doctor who had this question. The doctor asked how he could pray all the time when his work needed all of his focus.

St. Sophrony said unceasing prayer is not about constant words. It's about keeping your heart open to God all the time by thinking God is there and watching.

"I'm distracted all day"

You can't do this all day. That is, not with your human strength. But what you can do is whenever you remember, go back to it.

You forget. You remember. You return to it. Over time, you will find yourself remembering more often. It will become a good habit, a second nature.

Then, with the Grace of God, it can become something you have in your heart at all times.

Being personal in prayer?

When you bring your pain to God, it doesn't matter how you express it. Prayer isn't always about words. Your unspeakable pain itself becomes your prayer. God doesn't need words to know.

That said, if you want to grow prayer, there are specific ways to do so. If you spend all your time trying to find the right words, you waste your energy.

You don't need to talk or ask for anything. He already knows your needs before you even pray.

If your heart is in pain, you can speak how you wish. But if you speak to God as you would to a friend or a spouse, it won't lead you to the deep, noetic prayer. It won't lead you to the kind of prayer that joins you to God on a spiritual level.

²⁰ **St. Sophrony:** a recent saint who was renowned for his theology and love

Praying for others?

In the monastery, we would say **“Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon your servant, so and so.”** Then we would read our whole list of names.

Then we would continue the rest of the prayer rope with the normal Jesus Prayer. And all this prayer would go to this person or these people.

Don't write thousands of names because it ends up being very impractical.

For practical reasons, you don't change it to "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon us." You keep saying "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon me, a sinner." This prayer covers everyone.

How to pray in Church?

Elder Aimilianos was saying that the Divine Liturgy is so important that if you can focus, you should. This is still focus on God.

But if you can't, it's better if you use the prayer rope. Especially if you don't understand the language. That can be hard sometimes.

Even priest-monks in Mount Athos, when they liturgize, they will still use a prayer rope. It helps them to focus.

And the other thing is that once you cultivate the Jesus Prayer a lot, it becomes like your second nature. You do it no matter what.

When the Jesus Prayer becomes second nature and you have enough practice, it can happen.

Other kinds of prayer

Watchfulness will clear the space inside us. Then once you have a clear space you need to fill it up with something.

The easiest way to fill it up and the most fruitful is just the Jesus prayer. But there are other forms of prayer that sometimes you will be using.

If you're not using the Jesus prayer, let's say during a service, you still need watchfulness to pray.

Like a priest, when he reads the prayers. He doesn't say the Jesus prayer. That is, unless it's second nature. He says the prayers that he sees in front of him. But he still needs watchfulness.

If not, he will be thinking of what he will look up instead of the sacrament that he has in front of him.

Again, when you're in the Church, if you were to focus on the chanting, it's the same thing. The exact same thing. Because you can't do both. You can't do the Jesus prayer and chant.

Sometimes people can read and say the Jesus prayer. But to reach this level, you need tons of practice.

Let's say that something happens to a family member while you're at dinner. You need to pray. Clear your mind and say to God, "Please God help my parents." Something like this. This is also prayer with watchfulness.

Again, though, the easiest and most fruitful is the Jesus Prayer.

How to ignore thoughts?

The focus needs to be on God. Not on trying to ignore thoughts. Not on trying not to have them.

You have to block thoughts out as soon as you notice them, and let them go away.

Let the thought do whatever it wants. You just keep doing what you're doing and keep your focus on Christ.

Nor is watchfulness some thought you keep in the back of your mind to remind you to ignore thoughts. It's just blocking them out.

They will attack you. That's not a problem. The problem is if you allow them to occupy your intellect.

Meaning, you allow the weeds to develop. When you allow the weeds to develop, your prayer will become weaker. Because you can't focus on two things.

The more you try every time, the stronger you will become in this process.

So eventually, you will not only be able to stop the thought when it attacks you. You will also be able to tell that there is a thought coming before it arrives.

Your spiritual capacity will increase to the point that you will sense there is a thought coming. You will be ready.

Regardless of where they come from, your approach should remain the same. Ignore them as soon as possible and focus just on Christ.

This is the key to salvation from thoughts and in general.

What not to do?

To talk back to a thought is not the same as to entertain it. **To talk back to a thought can be an honest attempt to reject it. But it can still be dangerous for the untrained nous.**

That's because thoughts are very cunning. They can easily deceive us.

You have a thought, "The Elder doesn't love me." You respond with, "No, that's not true. He loves me. Leave me alone."

That is an example of trying to reject the thought. But doing this results in getting further caught up with it.

To entertain a thought is different. It happens when you agree with a thought. You let it take root in your mind. For instance, the thought says: "The Elder doesn't love me." You agree with it. "Yes. He did this and that. It proves he doesn't love me."

This is a far more dangerous path. It pulls us into an inner story that feeds the lie.

What if thoughts stay?

There are different ways you can try to get away from thoughts sticking around. You can try with prayer. You can try by ignoring it. You can attempt to distract yourself with something else that you like. You can call and talk to someone if you can't pray.

"I naturally have a lot"

It is more exhausting to try and keep up with your thoughts than ignore them.

"I have few thoughts"

Sometimes you do not have spiritual warfare or you do not have temptations and evil thoughts. But it doesn't mean that you are truly at peace.

The demons either want to convince you that there is no spiritual warfare. Or they make it so you will not have any bad thoughts for a while. We relax, and then they attack us.

Sudden, strong thoughts?

The key is to start from a strong position. Like a soldier who remains on guard even when there's no immediate attack.

Of course, we're human. And not everyone is accustomed to living with such military-like discipline.

When something like this happens, redirect your gaze. Focus on something else. It might continue to bother you for a while.

But if you pray and humbly ask God for help, the image will eventually fade. Over time, you won't even recall it happened.

What not to do?

These sudden temptations are like someone throwing a bomb. **Don't panic. If you do, you've lost half the battle.**

Don't be afraid. God sees everything. Keep your heart open before Him. Even if you looked at something and enjoyed it in a sinful way, don't try to hide it from God. Be honest.

"Alright, I fell. I liked what I saw. But I don't want to have it as a memory. I want to focus on You. Help me go back to You."

God will help. Don't hide. Don't panic. Things will become easier.

Overwhelmed by them?

Sometimes you can't even pray. That's how strong the thoughts can be.

If you can't pray, distract yourself physically. That's why the Fathers used to advise distraction sometimes.

You will do something else which is irrelevant. But focus on it. It could even be counting your fingers, or basketball or whatever. But focus there.

This distraction straight away breaks down the thought's strength into half. And after that you can pray. You can do other things and it will definitely go away. This is a form of watchfulness.

“If I can’t ignore them?”

You try to defend yourself by ignoring the thoughts. But in the end, you must trust in God.

For example, I try not to judge someone at work. I honestly try hard. But my nous keeps going back to these thoughts.

Will my anger help me push myself more? It might. **But what if, instead, I was honest with myself? This is already fifty percent of the answer.**

And for the other fifty percent, say: “If God doesn’t give me the ability, I can’t do it.” This is how you entrust yourself to God.

You do not rely on your own strength. When you trust your own strength, you get upset with yourself. You are more easily led to despair.

This happens because we believe that we can make a solution on our own. In other words, we rely on ourselves. This is the opposite of watchfulness.

Watchfulness stops thoughts because you trust God more than yourself. **You do not rely on yourself. You turn to God within you. He takes care of everything else.** You don’t. He does.

When confess thoughts?

You ignore your thoughts. Whatever keeps coming back you confess it. Whatever doesn't come back you say "Thank God it's not back." And you move on.

Recurring thoughts?

It is important to confess thoughts that keep coming back. Even if you don’t talk with them. Why?

Because their persistence shows a weakness or an issue that needs addressing. Your spiritual father can help you with this.

If these thoughts keep coming back, there is a reason. Ignoring them won’t solve it. Make your spiritual father aware of them.

We need to be honest with ourselves. **We might believe that we’re striving against thoughts. We might think we are struggling toward spirituality.**

But if our heart still wants things that we’re ‘trying’ to avoid, it’s not the devil’s fault. It’s not the failure of watchfulness.

It means that we haven't fully prepared ourselves to let go of specific things. We may not have prepared ourselves to sacrifice something we want.

Especially if it's something we want deep within. Even if it's small like an ice cream. In this case, it becomes much easier for thoughts to become fantasies.

You have to look inside yourself to see what you can fix. Even if it seems unrelated to your specific weakness.

You address these areas. Perhaps you work on your pride. Then you might find that other temptations go away on their own. Like blasphemous thoughts. Or like one of the flesh.

In this way, a temptation can teach us important lessons.

What are good thoughts?

We say that we reject thoughts to be able to go towards God. But it doesn't mean you stop thinking about your job when you're at work.

If you can maintain spiritual awareness while thinking, that's a different story. But when thinking is needed, like when you're solving a problem or working, you must allow yourself to think.

Thinking is a natural and necessary part of human life. It serves and fulfills us in many ways.

If you're a father, you can't just say, "I will have watchfulness with someone who bullies my son." You can't do that. This defeats who you are as a father.

And it does not mean that you will be upset. It does not mean you will kill someone. But it means that you will do what you can to make this unjust thing right. Or else, your son will be scarred.

Another example: to see someone's limits is not a bad thought. It's reality.

But once you see this, make sure that your judgment is not influenced by a desire to promote yourself. Or by a personal dislike of them.

What are bad thoughts?

We do believe that all the thoughts are lies. Not when you think about something voluntarily.

But all the attacks. All the intrusive thoughts. They're all lies.

Let's say you walk down the street. You get attacked by a thought telling you to judge someone who is dressed a certain way. This is the kind of thought you need to get rid of.

It does not matter if your thoughts about this person are positive or negative. It's safer to reject them. Both are equally harmful.

For instance, sometimes you judge yourself and compare yourself with others. It can be positive or negative. If you find them better than you, you might get sad. If you find them worse than us, you might get proud.

With these kinds of thoughts, I think we have to accept that they never say the truth. Elder Aimilianos says this.

Let's say you have a thousand thoughts that seem to be right, positive, good. Leading towards God. You should not start to talk with them.

The one-thousand-and-first thought might be from the demons. If you start to say yes to the good thoughts, your door will be open. The evil ones will also enter.

It's not possible to accept good thoughts without risking accepting bad thoughts. You can't win with your thoughts. That's why we reject all such thoughts.

Or they might start from a small truth. After they see you believe them, they will end up suggesting to you something which is irrelevant. Or something fearful, scary, depressing, distracting, frustrating.

You end up being so confused. And if you look back, you may not even know where all this started.

But it's very simple, actually. You have a thought. Then you generalize it. From there, this clearly turns into an issue.

“My thoughts are worse”

When you try to clean everything inside, things you'd never even seen before will now be obvious.

And I will give you an example that I hear all the time from younger men. They say, “When I was living a worldly life, there were so many girls around. I didn't care.

But when I try to focus on Christ, even one girl who is one kilometer away might be an issue.”

It gets harder before it gets easier. So don't give up.

Is this way passive?

It's not a bad thing to do your best for work. It's not a bad thing to study more if you can.

If anything, it can keep you out of trouble. It can keep your mind occupied. It can fill up your time. If you have a lot of time on your hands, watchfulness goes out of the window.

The more time you have, the less watchful you will be. That's our nature.

But then again, you can't be overtiring yourself. Then watchfulness will go out of the window as well. So you need a balance.

With specific issues like this that arise, you need to talk through them with your spiritual father.

What about mistakes?

If we've done something wrong, you ask for forgiveness. Then you forget about the past. You move on.

You can't live drowning in your mistakes. You have to live with God.

If you focus on the past and on your mistakes, you can't focus on God. You can't focus on two things at the same time. And focusing on what you're doing wrong is self-centered. You need to focus on God Alone.

You should never look back. Not even on your mistakes. You learn from your mistakes. Then you move on.

What about obstacles?

When your relationship with God is what it should be, the things that happen around you will not affect you.

Problems will still arise. But their significance will reduce to the point where they no longer disrupt your peace.

It won't matter because your focus is not there. Your focus is on God. Your conscience is clean. You move on.

What about problems?

You focus on this specific problem. But what usually happens is what happened to the Apostle Peter. He sank. He couldn't find the solution.

But if you are to keep focus on God, you will get where you should get. Believe it or not. A solution sooner or later will come in front of you. Or you will end up in dry land.

Either way it means there is no fear of sinking in the water. Whoever is with you will be safe. That's because you establish a connection with God, with the Holy Spirit.

As an example, years back, there was someone who asked me for advice. He then went and said to a powerful man some bad things about me because of it. I was only trying to help him. He heard it in a different way because it was not what he wanted to hear.

But I told him what I thought would help him in his life. There was a lot of fuss. I didn't bother to say why I did it. Not because I was disrespectful. I thought, "I'm not going to make any sense to anyone."

Let's say that was my gut feeling. How can you explain a gut feeling? But I thought, "This is the right advice for this person." This was not what his Mum wanted to happen. But this was the right advice.

So I gave him what I gave him. I kept doing what I was doing. Focusing on God. Taking care of my monastery. This and that. And I heard down the track that this person found himself in a very hard situation.

It was not my fault. Nothing to do with me. But it was because he didn't follow what I told him.

And I'm not trying to say that I'm wise. I didn't pay attention to the temptation of slander. **I kept on with my life and my focus on God.**

Our focus is God. The problem works out itself through the Holy Spirit. Not through our wisdom.

What about good things?

Even for spiritual gifts like tears, if you were to cultivate the tears and focus on the tears, you lose the goal. The goal is God. You focus on the gift. But you lose God.

Satan unceasingly tries to distract your attention from your focus on God. He tries to make you pay attention to anything else. Even good things.

This is an interesting point. For example, he tries to make you pay attention to the ethical view of life. To focus on how to make your life better. To go to the church services. To do everything that everyone tells you that they are good. Even to take care of your health.

They are of course good. But the first and most important thing that you need is watchfulness.

What about sins?

You should not fear sinning. What do I mean? You are human. You fall. You acknowledge your fall. You confess it. You move on. You can confess potential falls. Either way, you move on.

No one is perfect. If you think you're perfect, you deceive yourself.

I'm not saying that I will go out of my way to commit big sins. But it does not matter if I make mistakes. It does not matter what everybody says about me.

Nothing, nothing, nothing matters. The only thing that matters is God.

You need to leave your past behind. You cannot continue to dwell on it. If not you will never be able to focus on Christ. You will never move forward.

The brave fighter is not the one who doesn't fall. It's the one who keeps going even though they fall.

What about passions?

When we truly see ourselves, who we are, what we see is not very pleasant.

If you focus on your misery, you're losing God. Focus on Him. Then eventually the passions will go away.

What about other people?

When you become one with God through watchfulness, you'll sacrifice yourself for everyone. That's what Christ did. He was one with His Father. But He still sacrificed Himself.

For helping others, you need to know your limits. You need to know your strength. That's why the Desert Fathers say, if your brother falls into a creek and you want to save him? Don't give him your hand. Give him your stick.

So if it goes wrong, you won't lose your life as well. You will just lose your stick. If you can't help, instead of two people dying, one will die.

So keep this in mind when it comes to influences and temptations that are above your limits. You need to know yourself before you jump into the ocean.

If you can't swim into the ocean, be closer to the sand.

Loving people and associating with them are two different things. Loving everyone doesn't mean you will associate with people that take your peace away. You have to be spiritually smart.

Especially when you're weak and your peace can go away very easily. You can love them until the cows come home. But it does not mean that you will spend the rest of your life with them.

If someone tells us inappropriate things, you need to divert the conversation. Or you need to keep on without falling into gossip or idle talk. This includes talking about others without reason.

Of course, this doesn't mean you become anti-social. You can joke and be happy and pleasant.

But you cannot talk about people who are not present. Especially not in a negative way. Because that is gossiping. It's a sin. You must be watchful when you talk to others.

This is where 'unifying distance' helps. You create a respectful distance around you. In this way, others are not able to easily influence what you're doing.

You'll have more freedom to be brave. To be yourself. Now, unifying distance should not be confused with coldness. You don't create space through indifference.

Unifying distance helps create an atmosphere of mutual respect. This ensures others do not interfere with your personal boundaries.

For example, when you need to manage situations at work or with your close environment there are two ways.

You can peacefully tell them what's right. Then you leave it there. This is so that they can get a sense of what is right. At the same time you don't create too much of a mess in your relationship.

Or you avoid them altogether if they will never understand that they are wrong. At least then you take care of your own peace.

Sometimes we say to our spiritual father in confession, "This person caused me pain. He or she did this to me. I lost my peace."

Our brother may have been wrong. But in focusing on that, we lose the chance to prove our patience. We lose the chance to move closer to God.

Confession is not about what others have done to you. It's about your own actions and responses. **You must do your best to overcome this peacefully.**

Regardless of what others do, or any other hurdle or distraction. Always, you keep focus on God, ignore thoughts, and move on.

“My job tempts me”

If you need a break, take one. Prayer always helps too. While every person is different, we all need an experienced spiritual father to turn to.

If he knows us well, he can offer guidance on what you can handle and what you should avoid. **Above all though, you must be honest with yourself.**

I know a man who was a policeman in the field. He had a wife and kids. Each time he saw someone get hurt, he couldn't sleep. He simply could not take it.

What did he do? In the end, he asked for a transfer to the office. If you can't do it, you can't do it.

The important thing is to be honest with yourself and see your limits. When you do, you find a path that suits you.

“I have a bad character”

Your character is not an obstacle to watchfulness. You did not create your character. You can work on your character. You can try to perfect it. But you did not create it.

Your character is like a special seal that God has carved for you. It's a tool gifted to you for the specific purpose of taking you to Heaven. This is just what your soul needs to approach the Divine Mysteries to which you're invited.

It is not a coincidence that you have a specific character. You can improve it. But you cannot blame your character. It is a gift from God.

“I need to heal inwardly”

What's the solution for our limping society, misguided attractions and character gaps? It is simple: God.

God is our spiritual answer to all things non-spiritual. That's whether it be psychological, emotional or attractational gaps. (I am not referring to severe clinical cases here.)

The spiritual (not psychological) approach to life is straightforward. Focus on God.

Focus on God, not on your psychological gaps. Acknowledged or not. Focus on God, not your emotional gaps. Known or yet to be discovered.

Focus on God, not your attractional gaps. Whether you are fully responsible for them or not. Focus on God, not on who He reveals you to be, or your sinfulness.

In the end, it does not really matter whether you know yourself or not. Let's say you find all your gaps. Even then, what truly matters is that you focus on God.

Watchfulness is all that matters in life. Believe it or not.

Psychological problems?

Someone has to deal with a serious psychological problem. If you were to tell him to just go and practice watchfulness, he might just not be able to. It might be very, very hard for him.

Someone might suffer from intrusive thoughts that are not just the common ones. They are very persistent. Very strong. OCD can do that. It can give you thoughts that you can't get out of.

You can talk to them about watchfulness until the cows come home. But they struggle. They have a weakness. They need help.

But you need to find the right psychologist. The right therapist. The same way that you need to find the right spiritual father.

Sometimes finding an Orthodox psychologist might not be very easy. But still someone with Christian values. Or at least with some values. Because in our society values vary. Then it can get very confusing.

So if there is a counselor that can assist them to come to a normal standard, then watchfulness is easier. And everybody needs watchfulness.

What about pain?

If I realize that God is there in my pain, and I manage to have a connection with Him while I'm in pain, the pain can disappear.

The same way as when the martyrs were getting killed. Then they had the deepest connection with God. Why? Because God is there.

When God is there, everything is perfect. When Christ was going through the cross, this was perfection. Even though it was so deeply painful.

God will transform pain into spiritual growth. But it takes time. And sometimes the patience is unbearable.

What about despair?

It's not always possible to prevent reaching the brink of despair. **If you find yourself there, it's essential to give yourself a breath of fresh air. You need to recover. You need to rebuild the strength to continue.**

Saint Sophrony recounted a moment on Mount Athos. A hermit came to him with this exact issue.

His advice was simple yet profound. "Stand on the edge of the abyss. When it feels beyond your strength, break away. Have a cup of tea."

This teaches that you should push yourself. But you must avoid going past the point of no return.

Giving yourself some comfort can help you keep going. Whether a walk, listening to music, or a cup of tea.

You must remember that as a human being, you exist in body, soul and spirit. Your spiritual life is paramount. But you also live in a psychological and physical world.

Sometimes, what you truly need is rest. Or a change of environment. Or just a conversation with a friend for support.

These 'material' things can relieve you from the strain. They can renew you spiritually. They can drive away despair.

Drowning in temptations?

The waves becoming bigger than you is impossible when you focus on God. There is nothing that God cannot get you out of. Nothing.

You just need to focus on Him. It's just that when we see big waves, our faith gets shaken. When our faith gets shaken, forget about the waves again. Focus on God.

It can get scary. But we let it become scary. We let the fear inside us. Or let's say the fear is too much for us. If you keep focusing on God and on the peace of your heart, in the end the fear will go away.

In the end God wins. **No one can win against God. It's impossible. It's impossible.**

“God doesn't hear me”

God has given us authority. Even a simple person, our prayers, they have authority. God listens. He is not just “not listening.”

There is a simple story that describes this exact situation. It was Christmas. A single mother with her little boy passed by some shops. They looked at the window displays.

The boy saw a toy that he liked and said to his mother: “How great would it be if I could have this toy as a Christmas gift?”

The mother responded: “Pray to God. If He wants you to have it, there will be a way of getting it.” She didn't have enough to buy it.

The child prayed. But Christmas passed. He never received the gift. One day, they went by the same shop. They saw the same toy. And the mother said to her son: **“God didn't answer your prayer.”**

But the child said to his mother: “No Mum. He did. But He said no.”

So we need to know that what we have in mind is not always what is best for us.

“God's abandoned me”

If we want to succeed in our lives, we must understand that we should be happy when we feel God has abandoned us. Or when temptations are putting us through greater struggle.

We should be happy because this is how we grow spiritually. Without these difficulties, we will never gain the experience that helps us grow.

God has a way of turning ugly things to beautiful things. What you need to take care of is just that your intention is correct.

“What if I've lost years?”

Elder Aimilianos says it's better if we learn this at fifty, than never start. Then basically we will die without making a start.

Watchfulness is the shortcut. God will take care of the rest. Nevertheless, it doesn't mean that we will be mature enough to accept God's grace right away.

But when we are, God comes immediately.

“I am very weak”

We struggle and ask ourselves, “Am I going to make it? My enemies, my passions, and the demons are stronger than I am. What will I do?”

Saint Hesychios says this. **"When you struggle with watchfulness, don't be afraid of the tempter or your enemies. Just keep your mind focused on Christ** and follow the example of the lion.

A lion is attacked by a pack of dogs. He knows that if he fights back, his chances of winning are small. He's outnumbered. So, what does he do? He hides in a safe place.

The dogs cannot attack all at once. They are afraid to enter the lion's hiding spot alone. In the same way, when you are attacked by thoughts, you should hide in the Jesus Prayer. You should keep Christ in your heart.

When you do this, your enemies will not be able to approach or defeat you."

How hard to push?

It's good to push yourself. You must. But you should only push yourself to just a little less than your limit. Why?

If you push too far, you might tire yourself out completely. You would then have no strength to deal with unexpected trials.

If something feels suffocating it's a sign that you are neither comfortable nor happy. It also indicates spiritual, psychological, or physical fatigue.

When the soul is exhausted, spiritual growth becomes impossible. You step off the path to Eternal Life. You risk wasting precious time. As Elder Aimilianos used to say: “A tired person is useless to God.”

So if you're working towards developing yourself spiritually, do it in small stages. You can't do it overnight.

And this is actually discernment. Because if you try to do everything, you can't. You will just fail.

It's consistency that makes us either sons of God or sons of the devil. It doesn't really need a lot to develop into a non-easily reversible condition.

But even consistency needs to be balanced. What do I mean by that?

Both physical and spiritual training need consistency and discernment at the same time. Training harder and harder might result in exhaustion. It might end up taking you backwards if you go above your limits.

Is progress safe?

Will God allow us to progress spiritually if He knows you can't handle it? The more you grow spiritually, the more you can handle. (Both positive and negative.)

Something that you experience for the first time spiritually might look very strong. Then later you might experience the same thing with the same strength.

But your limits, they can expand. You can grow spiritually. So you can handle more.

If God gives me a gift and I take it and run away, it means that I can't handle it. I use the gift in a selfish way. He is not going to give me more.

And whatever He gave me, we can't say it was a waste. God does not make mistakes. But we didn't use it wisely.

If you keep these gifts to yourself, you will lose them. Either that or if you were to grow more, it'd be spiritually dangerous for you. That's because the only thing you would achieve is to be proud. Then you'd get deluded, or lose God or your path.

But let's say that whatever He gives you, you use it for the people around you. Then there is no reason for Him to not give you more. There is no reason for Him to not grow your limits.

But by saying that, you need to be cautious. You can only work with the limits you know you have. And it's very important to know your limits.

Whatever God gives you is not for you. And if you have this principle, God can keep blessing you. As always, according to His will and what you can handle. But He will increase what you can handle.

Limits vs. Laziness?

It's something you learn through experience. No one can teach you exactly where that line is. **It takes years of trial and error to know your limits.**

The more you try though, the more you become aware of your strengths and weaknesses at any given time. Both of these can vary depending on your life stage and circumstances.

Someone might try to define your limits for you. But they wouldn't precisely reflect your personal capacity. You have to discover them yourself.

Sometimes you might push too far. Then you find yourself worn out. Other times, you may see you have more strength than you thought. You can do more. So this process is personal.

What about relaxing?

I remember the story of St. Anthony the Great. He was in the desert. And he was telling jokes to his monks.

There was this hunter who went by. And he was scandalized. He couldn't understand it. Back then they were hunting with arrows and bows.

And St. Anthony told him, "Stretch your bow." He did. Saint Anthony said, "Stretch it more." He did. And then Saint Anthony told him, "Stretch it even more." And he said, "It will break."

And then St. Anthony said, "If your bow will break, these people will also break. They will break if they keep pushing themselves."

So if I'm an ascetic in Mount Athos or if I'm advanced in prayer, probably I wouldn't waste time on TV. But I need to also know my limits.

So if I had a very hard day and I need to relax from something, this is way better. Of course, you need to choose what you will watch. But there are other choices that are way worse. You need to know what you can handle.

Earthly things, they are not really earthly. Because God has given everything. Like you can start eliminating everything from your life because they're not spiritual. But if you go down this track you will lose your mind.

So it's a good thing not to see earthly things as "earthly." Because every earthly thing is given from God. **And if you have such an attitude, then nothing will bother you.**

But again, you need to know your limits. You need to know yourself. You need to know if it will help you or not. Everyone is different.

Even if it is to help you, it's like a knife. You can use it to cut bread. But if you're not careful, you can cut your finger.

“Why do I sin?”

Many times, the reason for our falls is our pride.

How to sin less?

It is because of our pride that God lets us fall. It is our willingness to humble ourselves that invites God's grace.

Second, every sin starts with a thought. To stop thoughts from growing, you must stop them when they are small. From when they first attack.

If you wait, they will grow into fantasies. Pictures painted on the mind. It will be harder to get rid of them.

Third, you need to know your weaknesses. From there, you need to provide for yourself. For example, let's say I like to eat a lot.

I know that I will be tempted if I go into the kitchen while food is being prepared. Instead of the kitchen, I can go for a walk in the garden.

In the same way, if you know that by going somewhere you will be tempted, don't. If you know that if you see something you will be tempted, don't. If you know that if you think about something you will be tempted, don't.

We have fallen so many times. We already know how such things work. That's where you need logic. Before falling. Not after.

Why be humble?

The humility you willingly practice yourself is a critical virtue. Without it, you cannot approach God.

Elder Aimilianos says that if you are humble, then on a daily basis your experience with God will increase. It will be different. It will improve. Or it will give you new knowledge. A new experience.

You need humility. You need humility because your war is against the demons who are very proud.

And if you are humble, you will have Christ's help at hand, close to you. In your heart.

How to be humble?

Humility is not proven by your actions. Humility is proven by your motives.

Let's say I was to start washing everyone's feet. And I do this to show to people that I'm like Christ. First of all, there's something wrong with my brain. And this could be a very proud action. Very proud. Trying to show off that I'm Christ-like.

So you need to ask yourself, "Why am I doing what I'm doing?"

If you willingly practice humility yourself, then God will help you as well. And then God doesn't need to step in your life in a drastic way to break your pride.

My spiritual child asked, "Elder, how can I be humble?" And I told him, "Ask for it."

And trust me, when you ask for humility, it will come to you from corners that you don't expect. And ask for it *gently*. Because you might not be able to handle it.

Humiliation vs. Humility

Sometimes there are situations and you are not responsible for them. Like trauma, loss, or pain. If you use them the right way, you can become humble.

If you don't use them the right way, you can be hurt psychologically. That's not humility. That's someone being hurt. It has nothing to do with humility. It has to do with extra pain.

But if we were humble enough, even if we go through trauma, loss, and pain, we will not be hurt. I don't know if this makes sense.

The humble person cannot be hurt. Because you're on the floor. Even if they step on you, you're on the floor. What can they do?

But let's say you think you're on the roof. Then they throw you on the floor. You won't accept it. You will be hurt.

How do you assess these situations? The first thing is that you need to know, if you can, your psychological limits. That's because if you don't, and if they push you more than what

you can handle, they won't find themselves happy. You will explode. So you need to know yourself. How much can you handle?

If you don't know how much you can be pushed around, you don't know how humble to be. And it's a humble thing when you know that you can't be pushed around anymore.

Then you will avoid these people in these situations. Because otherwise you will find yourself in a situation where you will lose your peace. And that's not a humble thing.

Authority vs. Humility

The second thing that I've got in mind: let's say that you see someone who's very peaceful.

People start trying to attack his family. Or they're trying to attack people that depend on him. Either people that he protects in a workplace. Or someone is a spiritual father and they try to attack his spiritual children. Or anything else.

I think that if other people depend on you, you need to defend them. That's an instinct that God has given to the parents and to nature. It's for a reason.

The Fathers of the Church also say humbling yourself before a proud person can make them a demon. This applies if you are responsible for them. This is like a son or a spiritual child.

Let's say you're humbling yourself, even when they are wrong. This keeps them from learning what is right.

Humility, it's not an easy thing. May God show His mercy on us.

Finding your path in life?

If you focus on God, your purpose in life, what you need to do, will come to you.

How to find God's will?

If you are searching for God's Will, it is found within inner peace. Nowhere else.

If you're trying to make a decision and lack inner peace, then God is "not present" in that choice for you. Unless you're someone who struggles with anxiety. In that case nothing feels peaceful.

But if your gut senses peace in another option, that's where God is. It does not matter if you like it or if you will need to deny yourself. This is what you should do.

When you feel this peace and have this "information," you take it to your spiritual father. You share how God has shown you His Will.

This isn't an easy topic to explain. But I'll try to illustrate it with an example of what it is to have the peace of God in you.

There was a monk on Mount Athos whose job was to serve in the guest house. One day, three visitors came. One from Canada, one from the US and one from the UK.

They sat and talked to each other. And the monk explained to them how to achieve inner peace. At the end of the talk, one of them said, "I believe you. Because while you were speaking to us, I felt your inner peace being transmitted to me."

That's spiritual peace. It's not something psychological.

If you visit a guru, on the other hand, you might notice an outward calm. But his heart could be like a brick. It could lack in love and humility.

Whatever "peace" he appears to have, cannot be passed on to you. And if he were to draw on the devil's power to offer you some form of "peace," you wouldn't feel calm. You'd feel anxious. Why?

Because the devil cannot transmit true spiritual peace. It's something he does not have.

To achieve another kind of peace, you could take a Valium. But that's just your body relaxing. It has nothing to do with the peace of your soul or the Holy Spirit.

These are different forms of peace.

How not to find it?

Do not ask for prophecies. Do not try to follow prophecies.

Elder Aimilianos once told me people who look for prophecies will end up giving oaths. And they will not keep them.

So we say like Pharaoh, "I want a sign about God's will." Then I wait for the sign. The sign comes. Then I have the mindset of looking into signs all the time.

I wait for another one to convince me that the first one was right. And then this and then that. And then whatever I was going to do about God will just be destroyed.

I took the direction of the miracles. Meaning trying to find God's gifts, and not trying to find God Himself.

How to unite with it?

I said to Elder Aimilianos, "Elder, I want to submit my will to God. The same way that Christ was on the cross." **And he told me not to submit, to unite.**

When you become one with Christ, then you become a walking will of God. There is nothing to search, to find. Wherever you go, the Holy Trinity is with you. Whatever you do, the Holy Trinity will bless it. Whatever you do is what God wants you to do.

There is no 'you and God.' It's one.

What about Communion?

The Divine Liturgy, the Sacraments, and the Jesus Prayer are the highest forms of prayer we have.

Prayer is my move towards God. Holy Communion, it's God's move towards me. You want to do both. Then you have the greatest potential of existentially, ontologically, becoming one with God.

Elder Aimilianos says prayer does not work if you don't have Holy Communion. He says, "If there is no worship and no Holy Communion, there can be no prayer. Any prayer uttered apart from them is false."

After I didn't have my Elder around, I was in a situation where there was pressure on me not to commune as often. For the sake of humility.

Elder Aimilianos had blessed me to commune very frequently. And I didn't have my Elder Aimilianos to tell me if I should continue.

And then I understood something. Having Holy Communion was above any humility I could show by not having Holy Communion.

That's because Holy Communion is the extreme humility of Christ.

I'm not telling you to do the same because everyone's soul is different. This was the answer to my prayer. I think it was through Elder Aimilianos' prayers. It was not because of my wisdom.

What about Confession?

If you don't have watchfulness you cannot understand what is wrong within you. Not what you need to confess nor what you need to correct. Your vision will be unclear.

The focus is on everyone around you and the difficulties they give you. It's not on the things within you that need fixing.

And then if you find something or have something to confess, you confess it and move on. As we said, you don't stay in the past.

To Read With Your Guide (Not Needed to Start)

Christ grows in the heart

When you get more involved with prayer, when you focus more – you know how you have a donkey? And a bamboo stick with a string and a carrot. The donkey follows the carrot and keeps going.

God gives you some of Himself in your prayer. This gives you the motivation to ask for more.

The more you ask, the more of Him you get. The more you ask, your love grows for more. For more of God.

And then it feels like a struggle. You want way more and you demand it. You don't just ask. You demand it.

Again, Elder Aimilianos says that all this has to be done with a lot of humility. If you do not have humility, you will never get to these results.

What is true prayer?

It doesn't mean that thoughts will not be around. It means that you are united with God. I'm not directing my prayer to anyone. Christ and me, we are one.

And Elder Aimilianos explains this somewhere. "So when you see a lion far away, you will focus there. But you might be thinking it's far or let's see how many people are around.

When it comes closer, your thoughts become less. You focus on the lion more.

Now the lion is in front of your face with an open mouth. You forget everything in the whole planet. There's a lion there. It's ready to eat me. This is what happens when you come close to God. Your focus on everything else disappears.”

You become one with Christ in this mystical way.

When you reach this level, you are one with God the way that the husband is one with the wife. So basically, you walk around and Christ walks around in your heart. And you don't need to do much to help others.

To get here, you need to keep trying.

What's sensing God?

You sense the Presence or Qualities of God. His Love, Peace and Joy. It is not about seeing here.

Rather, it's about experiencing His Presence and sensing His spiritual closeness. You may not necessarily 'see' anything. But this Communion with God is unmistakable. The same way you sense someone nearby in a room without seeing them with your eyes.

In the same way, the time may come in which you feel something indescribable. Like resting in God's Hands. Or dwelling in His Eternity. It transcends all physical and mental comprehension.

You don't imagine anything. It's very dangerous to imagine anything.

What's seeing God?

Have you ever felt the Gaze of God upon you? What is the vision of God? **What is it like when God is looking at us?** It is the Brightness of His Eyes. The Radiance of His Face. It is the Light that dissolves your darkness.

When God looks upon me, I know I am receiving His Light. I am receiving God Himself.

You see God through the nous. It is a noetic encounter, a vision, where one might see God, Saints, Christ or even the Holy Trinity.

These Visions are often described as ecstasies. They are not dependent on physical sight. They're not like how you see dreams without your bodily eyes. Whether one's eyes are open or closed is irrelevant.

The experience is beyond the physical senses. It has to do with the spiritual part of your existence, your nous. These Visions are vivid spiritual perceptions. They occur in a state of heightened consciousness. You are fully aware.

This is what it is to have a Vision of God.

You don't imagine anything. It's very dangerous to imagine anything. Also, the Saints say to ignore appearances of angels, saints, God, fragrance, light, etc.

How to keep Christ?

Someone once asked an Elder on Mount Athos: "Elder, when the Grace of God comes, how can I make sure I never lose it?"

The Elder replied: "**Close the doors behind you. God will do the rest.**" **What does that mean?**

When God gives us a spiritual Experience, whether it's peace, joy, or something else, He opens a door for us to enter.

To keep it, you must keep your focus there. You must not look back.

Closing the doors behind you means locking out distractions. That's whether they come from your past. Or your worries. Even the things you think you should be doing spiritually.

This includes things you were spiritually doing in the past but are no longer called to do. That's because they are not the things God presently asks of you.

Looking back on these things risks your inner peace. A river doesn't flow backward. You shouldn't look back. You should not let your focus drift to things that pull you away from where God has placed you in this moment.

Once they asked Elder Aimilianos a question. "When the Saints are in Ecstasy, when they have an Experience of God, do they keep saying the Jesus Prayer?"

Elder Aimilianos said: "If you're in front of God, what are you going to do with the Jesus Prayer? You don't need the Prayer to get there. You are There. You don't need the steps to get there. The steps are past tense."

“What if I’ve lost Him?”

Let’s say God has given you a spiritual gift that eventually fades. Like an Experience of inner peace.

If you continue living your life with honesty and integrity, that gift doesn’t disappear. It becomes your Eternal State.

It’s as if you’ve made a deposit in a heavenly bank account. You may not feel it every day, just as you do not see your money everyday. But it remains with you. It grows with interest. It is not lost. It will increase endlessly.

This is what Heaven will be like. It’s a state of continuous growth in God’s Grace.

How to bring Him back?

Spiritual Experiences are ultimately gifts from God. No matter how much you desire them, you cannot make them return if God does not want it.

That said, there’s no reason why God wouldn’t give them back if you are honest with yourself and with Him. Of course you also need to live with spiritual intelligence. That is, not wasting your time and energy for no reason.

You will find that these gifts often return if you are doing what you should be doing. If you are closing the doors of your heart behind you. And sometimes, they come back even greater than before.

Also, reflecting on the memory of a spiritual Experience has the power to revive it in you.

When you have a spiritual Experience, you should keep your nous there. You should recall it as often and as vividly as possible.

Doing so not only secures your inner peace. It can even lead to the regeneration of things greater.

Each time you focus on a past spiritual experience, you can build upon it. You can use it to climb to a new level in your relationship with God.

And when you get to that next level, the same principles apply. Stay present there. Focus. Close the doors behind you.

These are steps in your prayer life. Again, you don’t imagine anything. It’s very dangerous to imagine anything.

Next, we discuss the questions that come up with living under guidance.



Elder Aimilianos with the now-Bishop Emilianos as a young man.

Step 2. Live under Guidance.

What's an example?

I want to emphasize the importance of the people in our lives who show us the way. This is what Elder Aimilianos did for me. He could give your soul the Holy Spirit. It was not his love and his freedom. These are from God, of course. God is love. God is freedom. God is joy. But he could give you the Holy Spirit. He could install the Holy Spirit in your soul. If this were to happen, then love and joy and freedom are just details. Not because they're mere details. But if you have God, you have everything. This is what he could do for you! And this is what he did with his spiritual children. Of course each according to what they could handle. Or according to their purpose in the Church. But this is what he could do.

Elder Aimilianos would say: "I go to my Elder with a huge issue I believe I can never overcome. (My Elder is the person I comfortably and freely already chose to surrender my soul for guidance.) It could be a deadly health problem. Or something like that I was kicked out of the monastery. He talks to me. The issue is not cleared up. But I leave in a state of peace as if it does not exist."

What is the summary?

Do this

- Find your guide. (Read pp. 53-57 for how.)
- Ask for a simple check-in schedule (how often, and what to bring).
- Bring your real struggles honestly, without hiding.

Don't do this

- Don't self-direct.
- Don't treat your guide like a guru.
- Don't collect advice from many voices.

If you feel confused

- Don't solve it in your head.
- Write down your questions.
- Bring them to your guide.

Recap

- Guidance keeps you safe.
- Guidance keeps you on track.
- Guidance keeps you in the Church.

Some major questions in this section:

- What's a spiritual father versus a confessor?
- What should you look for, and what are red flags?
- How to find one, and what to avoid in your search?
- How to work with one?
- How to deal with thoughts against them, having lots of questions, what to do when they're wrong or ask too much of you?
- When to change one?

What is one?

What does it mean to have a spiritual father? It means having someone who will guide your spirit into Union with the Holy Spirit.

And there's a difference between your elder or spiritual father, and your confessor.

Sometimes they are all one thing. But, going to a priest for confession, it can happen wherever you are. To any priest.

But your elder, or your spiritual father is the one who will tell you, "This is the right path for you."

The spiritual life is not something you can read about and simply go ahead and do.

It does not happen by fasting, praying, or following rules. It happens when you put yourself into God's Hands and you have the right guide. The right spiritual father.

One who has been through the spiritual struggle and can help you grow.

It's like a sport. If you do not have the right trainer for boxing or gymnastics, you will never achieve anything. You need the right trainer. Someone who really knows.

What to look for?

There is only one thing that you should be looking for. You should look for the spiritual peace of your heart.

If he gives you that? You're for him. He's for you. If not, well that's not it.

But if he helps you find that, it means that he helps you find your personal path towards God. This peace inside is the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes it's very hard to reach this point. That's because a spiritual child might be way too logical. They can't feel their heart. They can't follow it. In that case, it's hard.

Even so, I think that you will sense where you're most comfortable. And this comfort deep down is the Holy Spirit.

Everyone who wants to practice a spiritual life needs a spiritual father. Even if your first one isn't perfect. It's very simple.

And if you're going to practice prayer and watchfulness? You need to find a spiritual father who knows these things.

Let's say you have a spiritual father who doesn't. Then you won't receive the right guidance. It doesn't matter how much he might want to help you.

You need a specialist. Not a general practitioner. When you need something specifically, you go to the right specialist. Not a generalist. It's not safe.

We're not equipped to deal with these things ourselves. Without the knowledge, it's very dangerous. People have even lost their minds over such things.

But at some stage, you also need to find a spiritual father with whom your heart can be totally open and comfortable. You won't wish to hide anything at all from him.

This is how the Apostles were with Christ. They were like an open book. They hid nothing. This was because they were not afraid of Him. They knew how much He loved them. They could feel the Holy Spirit inside Him. They did not even know yet what the Holy Spirit was.

This bond is what will help you through the hard things in your life. But you need to find the right one.

In the Orthodox Church, you're free. If someone is not happy with me as their spiritual father, they can always find someone else.

In the Church you are free to keep searching for an understanding spiritual father. It is the Holy Spirit Who will lead you to him. When you find him, "something" inside you will let you know.

You will get a feeling. It's as if God is informing your heart: "Now you are in good hands. Let go of your fears. Let go of your anxiety which forces you to act in control. Let go of everything.

Entrust yourself. I will take good care of you. You are in a safe place. You are exactly where you are meant to be". The Holy Spirit will gently develop this feeling inside you.

This will be the proof that He is working your salvation through your spiritual father. You just found what you were looking for.

Christ says, "I am the good shepherd." He says, "My flock, they listen to My voice." Why did I follow my Elder, my spiritual father?

Because his voice, what he was telling me, made sense to me. But this proves that I was a member of his flock. If I wasn't, what he talked about would have made no sense to me.

When your spiritual father talks to you, it's as if this is the one thing that makes sense. And it's not because you try to convince yourself.

It's because your heart tells you that this is the only thing that makes sense. And that's how you know that this person is meant to be your spiritual father.

Red flags?

If you are afraid of your spiritual father, it won't work. If you feel he does not love you, it won't work. If you feel he does not understand you, it won't work.

Every single one of us has a very personal way of doing anything. And this is way more when it comes to prayer.

Spiritual fathers that try to impose, they know nothing about God. Like try to make you follow their exact steps. They know nothing about the Holy Spirit. They know nothing about themselves.

If they did, they would have known that they can't replace God. Spiritual fathers, they are there to guide us. They are not there to rule us. And they are not there to make us who they want us to be.

Some keep their spiritual children in a state of dependency. This stunts their spiritual growth. This isn't true spiritual fatherhood. Keeping someone as a child forever is a crime.

What about freedom?

A Christ- and Church-like spiritual father does not pass on his spirit to his Church and to his spiritual children through force.

He makes them feel loved and taken care of. He fosters an atmosphere in which they are comfortable and natural around him.

Spiritual children need to know that his living love allows them to feel safe, to feel secure. To be protected. To be unjudged.

When they freely and fully give themselves to him, then and only then is he able to pass on his spirit. To keep, to guide, and to protect them. To enlighten and to Deify them.

What about maturity?

When a spiritual father has a deep Orthodox spirit, he will never want you to become dependent on him.

His goal is to give you enough guidance that when he's not with you, you know how to act. You know how to live in a way that shows Christ.

If you cannot live without his constant presence, something is wrong. He needs to raise you to be a spiritually discerning adult. You need to come to be able to stand on your own spiritually. You need to come to learn how to solve spiritual problems when he's not there.

If this does not happen, his presence has been ineffective. If your spiritual father hasn't taught you how to hear God's voice in you, then he hasn't done his job. You will remain a spiritual infant. When he passes away, you will be spiritually "lost in the night."

How to find one?

I completely understand the lack of bright elders in today's world. I understand that we may have made our best attempts.

Despite this we still may have never found a Fountain of Light, a Fountain of Life. A Fountain of the Holy Spirit.

I know how difficult this search is. I know how profoundly important it is for our future in Christ.

However, I firmly believe that if we honestly and wholeheartedly seek a Source of Light, even if we don't consciously realize it, God will give us one.

The All-Knowing God has put us in a specific place and time in history. A place where our thirst can meet someone who might offer us water. Water that will allow us to quench our own Eternal thirst and become Fountains of Living Water.

Just like the seemingly "random" Samaritan woman. There's no such thing as "random" in the history of humanity. There's only God. God alone!

He manages His creation. He knows His creation before creating it. He ensures that we are born in the right place. At the right time. In the right environment. Under the right circumstances.

There is a Master Plan. Our Master skillfully Masters it for us all. He does it in a Magnificent and Incomprehensible way.

The timing of these important encounters with such people in our lives is guided by the Holy Spirit. It is never a simple matter of coincidence that we met our Elder in the manner we did. It was meant to be.

God was preparing us for this meeting before our birth. He carefully organized the specific timing and circumstances.

History, both personal and of our environment, obeys this Divine governing of time. It generates the unique moment when Christ will ask us: "Give me a drink." Every small detail of this irreplaceable scenario appears very natural.

Indeed it is, as God is the One Who orchestrates the very laws of nature.

Personally, I believe that God created me to be a disciple of my Elder. This is how deeply his personal words for me would resonate with my soul. I felt I was created to be his disciple!

Who could ever compete with such a God-given connection? I was always free, yet I always wanted to be around him. My choice, no one else's.

How not to look for one?

You are free to keep searching for a spiritual father. But you can't just go around in circles.

You can't try thirty spiritual fathers and then blame them because you're not comfortable. You find someone you're comfortable with. Someone you can totally open up to.

Then you need to be obedient to him. You need to stay there. By doing this, you help him to help you.

What about couples?

The best thing for a couple is to have the same spiritual father. If there is a disagreement about this, they need to work through it as a unit. They need to arrive at a peaceful solution.

How open to be with one?

What comes to your mind that you think you should not tell to your spiritual father? That's what you should say first.

You must be an open book for the eyes of God. You must be an open book for the eyes of your spiritual father.

If your soul were a book, you would lay out every single page. You would magnify every single letter. You would show every single comma. Every period.

Just so that he could see clearly and understand what happens inside you. That's even if you yourself are not fully aware of it. While you might not be able to explain yourself perfectly, you honestly try.

If you over accuse yourself, he will understand. If you unconsciously hide behind your anxiety, he will understand. If you do not have the will power to give up your ego, he will understand.

Just be an open book, no matter what this book might read. This is how you entrust your soul to your spiritual father. Through him you put your soul in God's Hands.

That's what it means to have a spiritual father.

Saint Ephraim from Katounakia,²¹ all his life he was talking about this. He says you cannot be obedient if you don't confess your thoughts. If you don't open your heart.

You might be obedient on the outside. But you can't truly be obedient. You need to let him know what you think.

How they help problems

A spiritual father will help you change your mind. He will help you direct your mind toward Christ. And if you do this, sins will just go away by themselves in the end.

It doesn't mean that along the way you won't fall. But it means that your main focus is on Christ. You know the path. You understand your weaknesses. You do your best. But your eyes are on Christ. They are not anywhere else.

This is what your Spiritual Father has to do for you. **And this is how he helps you overcome the obstacles. Then, with his help, you get to the other side.**

How to work with one?

Disciples who *hear*, experience immediate transfiguration. They experience both short and long-term drastic life changes.

My Elders' words were engraved in me because my soul thirsted for God's Will. **Everything he told me felt like it was already inside me. But it was hidden. It was simply waiting to be unearthed.**

I felt, sensed, accepted and realized that his words were for me and from God. **My Elders' guidance basically verified the data already downloaded in my soul.**

He cleared my path for understanding and adjusted my perspective. He allowed me to see what to do next. How to be. How to exist.

²¹ **St. Ephraim of Katounakia:** a recent saint who emphasized obedience and inheritance of grace to a great degree.

His deep insight discerned what I was created and what I had the potential for, to achieve in this life. He could clearly see God's ways in me and simply explained them.

Recognizing the word of my Creator in his words, and boy I *heard* him, I absorbed every single letter of his words. I clearly sensed my inner existence finding its fulfillment in his words.

Saint Ephraim of Katounakia's beautiful teaching on obedience says the following. For beginners, obedience must be blind.

This means fully trusting your Elder's judgement. You do not rely on your own. You share any concerns or issues. Especially if they ask you to do what's past your strength.

But you don't act on your own understanding unless you are told to do so. This blind obedience cultivates humility and trust.

As you grow spiritually, however, obedience is coupled with discernment. Let's say my Elder instructs me to do something. I sense that following the instruction will lead to unintended harm. Or even the opposite of what he desires for me.

My discernment kicks in. I don't disregard his guidance. But I adjust my approach in a way that aligns with his ultimate goal for my spiritual growth.

Your vision becomes more clear as you grow spiritually and grow a personal connection with God. When given an instruction, you can discern the most peaceful way to carry it out.

At the same time, you learn to trust your "spiritual gut." You sense any temptation, complication or unexpected challenge along the way. With discernment, you respond accordingly.

Whoever is obedient to their spiritual father, he will start having the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

What is inheritance?

The richer your spiritual father is in grace? The richer you are as his child. That's how it is.

Saint Ephraim of Katounakia once said the following. "If your Spiritual Father is a King Spiritually, you are born Spiritually a Prince or Princess.

If not, you need to work extremely hard to become rich Spiritually."

It indicates how blessed you are if you have such a Spiritual Father. And it points out how you may need to fix your inner disposition if you seek to find such a Blessing in your life.

Our Elder, a person already in the Likeness of God, *goes and prepares a place for us*. He experiences the above while still alive.

In this way, his spiritual mansions become our inheritance. Once he passes away, he secures this fortune for us and for himself.

But we don't need his death to access this treasure. We only need willingness like his. Genuine and sacrificial. We can inherit his full inheritance and even surpass his works.

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father."

This inheritance is like fire. You can have it all, and more. Yet it remains for the next person who wants to have it all, and more. Developing this fire doesn't diminish the source.

It just needs oxygen—genuineness. And it needs flexible matter—a sacrificial spirit. Perhaps this is why the Holy Spirit took the form of *tongues of fire* (Act. 2:3) on the day of Pentecost.

How to inherit grace?

To inherit and access such riches, we need one thing. A sort of PIN number we need to access our father's credit card.

It echoes through every miracle Christ performed: "*Believe in Me.*" The key is Faith.

Every absorption of Grace in our Holy Gospel is linked, in one way or another, to Faith. Lacking Faith in our Elder, leaves us excluded from his inheritance.

Without Faith, we won't understand him or what he stands for, even if we spend a lifetime beside him.

Faith has the power to move mountains. And in our case, move our ego and cast it into the sea (into a non-dangerous place for anyone), allowing us to be selfless. And in return, become heirs.

The more profound the love, the deeper the connection. The deeper the connection, the greater the absorption.

The greater the absorption, the higher the knowledge.

The higher the knowledge, the broader the understanding. The broader the understanding, the clearer we can talk about something.

The more you empty yourself, the greater amounts of Grace you absorb.

"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me." Believing in God and in our Elder has the power to make us move mountains.

Our Elder may not be like a *burning bush* or *sent to Pharaoh to lead the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt* (Ex 3:10).

But if he is a genuine and sacrificial human, he will have at the very least a spark of Divine Fire.

Our genuine and sacrificial willingness can transform us into *burning bushes*. Illuminating us with God's Love. Prompting us to make others heirs of His *mansions*.

It enables us to do *greater works* than our Elder.

Thoughts against him?

Can you say to your spiritual father that they have hurt your feelings? Not only you can. You have to.

Because if you don't tell him, there is no connection. But if you do, he will tell you why he did what he did.

Or it could be the spiritual children's fault. And then he will explain, "Look, I understand what you're saying. But at the same time, this is not how things are."

And this will remove the devil between the spiritual father and the spiritual child. **Usually with this temptation, the devil aims to destroy their bond.**

If the devil achieves that, the spiritual child is lost. Because bigger things will come up. Then he or she will not go for confession.

And the spiritual connection is just destroyed. This person is spiritually an orphan.

Are lots of questions bad?

It's annoying to be asked questions if you don't love your spiritual children.

But if your kids ask you for something, do you find it annoying? That's why you exist. That's why I exist.

If I didn't exist for that? I should not be a spiritual father. As simple as that.

What if they're wrong?

Someone might ask, "But what happens if I'm obedient and I understand that what they ask me to do, it's not perfect?"

What do I do if I understand that?"

Your spiritual father tells us to do something. Your bishop tells you to do something. You see things differently.

You might even be right. Or you might be wrong. But you have to tell him.

So if you come to me and tell me, "Look, Elder. Look here, my good bishop.

I know that's how you're thinking. But this is how I think. I'm not telling you because I don't want to be obedient. I'm telling you because this is how things worked in the past.

So, if we were to do something different, it might not be successful."

If I'm a proud person that I want to exercise my authority, I will reject what you're telling me.

But by doing this, I destroy my bond with you. And if you were right, I will be proven wrong big time.

But even if I knew that I was right, I still have to listen to you. I'm telling you what the bishop has to do or the spiritual father has to do. Then we go to what you should do.

Because I will understand how you think. This will tell me so many things about you. I will not learn this if I just tell you, "No, Susan. Do what I told you because I know better." It doesn't work like that.

Ultimately, though, Christ was obedient to His parents. Even though He knew He was right.

When He was 12 years old, they lost Him at some point. He was teaching in the Temple. He told them, "What do you expect? That's what I'm here to do."

But after that, He was obedient to them.

So obedience is very blessed because you cut your own will. Even if your elder or your abbas is not perfect.

But you need to know that this does not apply to extreme situations. (Unless you have extreme spiritual strength yourself.)

But as long as you are peaceful with your spiritual father, don't worry. God will protect us. Keep going. That's what the Fathers of the Church say.

What if they ask too much?

I have to want to do what Elder asks me to do. **But how can I want it when I don't want it? Or if I'm simply not capable of doing what he asks.**

This is part of the art of obedience. Knowing that I'm not capable of doing 100% what he wants me to.

I have to find the right way, the right process, to accept the Elder's advice. **You need to know your limits. You need to know how much of God's will you can make happen now. How obedient you can be to your spiritual father.**

And if it is 2%, it's better than nothing. Knowing that we failed 98%. But 2% is still better than 0%.

If your spiritual father is asking you to do something and you find it difficult to do, he needs to know that.

And he will tell you, "Look, if you can't do 100 prostrations? Do 10. If you can't do 10, do one. If you can't do any, be humble that you can't do any." There are middle stages.

Let's say I don't know my limits when I try to be obedient to my spiritual father. I don't tell him, "Look, I understand what you're telling me.

But I do not think I can fully be obedient here. Not because I don't want to. It's just not natural for me."

Not to say this might hurt you in a lot of different ways.

That's why Elder Aimilianos talks about the art of obedience. What he means is that you need to know yourself. **If you are told to do something that is difficult for you, you need to know how to go bit by bit, to be able to get there.**

And there is no rush when you struggle. If you rush, you might just make a mess.

When to change one?

When the Apostles were with Christ they were at peace. Christ gave them His Peace. Christ's Peace is the Holy Spirit. **If you don't feel at peace with your spiritual father, something is wrong.**

And there are usually two reasons. One is our ego blocking us from opening up.

Or he is simply not the right person for us. Either way, we need to sort it out.

If I was to move countries I wouldn't have changed my Elder Aimilianos. Even if it was the end of the universe.

Because whatever I am, I owe it to him. If he wasn't around, I would have never been a monk to start with. I didn't think in my life that that's what I wanted to do. I did not set out to become a monk.

I did it because I found a spirit that I never thought existed. And I did it because I thought that if I want to save my soul, this is the safest way. Through this person that I found. Very simple.

So, I don't care if my spiritual father is in a different country. If he is the one for me, he's the one for me. But this is different from a confessor, as we said.

If you keep just two things

When you hear about rules and this and that, don't get confused. If you just focus on God, everything else comes around. Everything else.

We all need a guide. My Elder's example towards us his children was: "And his own soul he throws away for joyous bleats."

What to do next

- If you do not have a spiritual father, find one. He should help you be one with Christ.
- Once you have one, and he gives a blessing, start this work in full. Start in prayer. Then do it through the day as much as you can. Do about 80%. Keep some strength for temptations.
- This focus can look more than one way. Work that out with your spiritual father.
- Focus on God. Not on all else. If God shows you what you are? Look at God. Not at yourself.

- When we say, “stay on the words of the prayer,” we do not mean, “think through each word.” We mean: keep your focus there. Think nothing else.
- Watchfulness is not some extra thought in the back of your mind. It is this: block out intrusive thoughts by focus on God.
- If a thought is not your own calm, chosen thought, let it go. Do not keep it. Do not answer it. Do not accept it.
- Pick what is most full of spiritual peace. Then bring it to your spiritual father, so he can confirm it.
- Be humble on purpose. But keep it calm. And keep it in your limits.
- Your spiritual father should have walked this path for years. He should be able to help lead you to God. But there are levels. An Elder has great authority. A spiritual father or confessor who knows prayer may be less far along. Even so, you still owe obedience. And he is still able to guide you.
- Your spiritual father should know you and love you. He should give you freedom. You should be able to open your heart with ease. He should help you grow up and be one with God. The goal is that one day you can stand without him, like a child grown up.
- If some of these are not there, you may need to change spiritual fathers. But watch your ego. Do not change with no cause. Do not keep going from one guide to the next once you have found one with whom you are at spiritual peace. Find one you can truly work with. Stay with him or her.

- Once you have found your spiritual father, be open. Obey. Most of all, confess thoughts that keep coming back. They show deep things that must be worked through.

Common pitfalls

- Do not focus on what is not God. Not on mistakes. Not on thoughts. Not on sins. Not on obstacles. Not on your inner state. Not on anything else.
- Do not pray without trying to keep the mind clear clear of thoughts. It is better to work to keep the mind free of thoughts, even with no prayer, than to pray while the mind is full of thoughts. That can go very wrong. False ways come from thoughts.
- Do not leave the mind blank, in watchfulness, with no prayer for it to hold to.
- Do not engage intrusive thoughts. Do not talk back to them. Do not accept them. Let them go.
- Do not trust intrusive thoughts. This can lead to disaster.
- Do not leave the mind blank, or focus on God, in a way that harms your day's work. Do not use this to run from your work as a parent, at your job, or in any other duty. Work this out with your spiritual father.
- Do not block thoughts in a way that means you never think at all. Calm, chosen thought is fine. Intrusive and passionate thoughts are not. In prayer, all thoughts should be blocked out.
- Do not do all you can all the time, with no strength left. That opens you to temptations.

- Do not confess each thought. That will weigh down you and your spiritual father.
- Do not hide thoughts that keep coming back. And do not fail to work through what lies under them.
- Do not push far past your limits. That can make a person give up the spiritual life.
- Do not make choices that are not full of spiritual peace.
- Do not walk this path with no spiritual father who is already on it. To go on with no such guide can lead to catastrophe.
- Do not hide things from your spiritual father once you have found one with whom you are at spiritual peace. Most of all, do not hide thoughts that keep coming back. Do not hid big things you do not agree on. Do not hid if you're hurt. Do not hide if you feel you're asked to do what is past your limits.
- Do not stay in a bond with no freedom, or no growth.
- Do not go to the spiritual father for any end but being one with God. Both in yourself, and through the grace you get through the spiritual father.

The Fathers about this path

On watchfulness

“Keep your mind fixed firmly on God.” – St. Sophrony of Essex’s answer when asked the essence of spiritual life.

When asked how to become holy: “It’s very simple. Just think about God all the time.” – St. Porphyrios of Kavsokalivia

“Watchfulness is a spiritual method which, if sedulously practiced over a long period, completely frees us: with God’s help from impassioned thoughts, impassioned words and evil actions. It leads, in so far as this is possible, to a sure knowledge of the inapprehensible God, and helps us to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries. **It enables us to fulfill every divine commandment in the Old and New Testaments and bestows upon us every blessing of the age to come.**” – St. Hesychios the Priest, in the Philokalia

“The essence of the commandments is always to give precedence to the one that embraces them all: mindfulness of God.” – St. Gregory of Sinai, in the Philokalia

“Prayer is called a virtue, but in reality it is the mother of the virtues; for it gives birth to them through union with Christ” – St. Mark the Ascetic

“Before the teaching concerning the work of vigilance [or watchfulness] had been systematized, before it was known and freely circulated, the Fathers and spiritual people toiled greatly in praxis [or external works]. They kept many fasts, many vigils, endured hardships, etc. But when the work of vigilance came to light as a systematic method, then the amount of asceticism was reduced – not because it is unnecessary, but because the Fathers dedicated themselves more to spiritual work than to praxis. **Through the work of watchfulness they were freed from thoughts, and the passions were reduced. The work of watchfulness gave them purity of heart.**” – Elder Ephraim of Arizona

“Having been tempted over a great length of time in things from the right hand and from the left, and testing myself often in both, and having received countless blows from the adversary, and been deemed worthy of great and secret aid, I have carried on an examination of myself for many long years; and through experience and God’s grace **I have learned that the foundation of all good things,** the return of the soul from the enemy’s captivity, and the path which leads to the light, and itself brings life, are these two virtuous activities: to remain collected in one place, and to fast perpetually. I mean, **to set for yourself the rule of wise mastery of the belly, of prudent and immovable continuance in one place, and of unremitting study and meditation on God.**” – St. Isaac of Syria.

“The Fathers abandoned all other forms of spiritual labor and concentrated wholly on this one task of guarding the heart, convinced that through this practice they would also possess every other virtue, whereas without it no virtue could be firmly established. Some of the fathers have called this practice stillness of the heart, others attentiveness, others the guarding of the heart, others watchfulness and rebuttal, and others again the investigation of thoughts and the guarding of the intellect. But all of them alike worked the earth of their own heart, and in this way they were fed on the divine manna (cf. Exod. 16: 15)...

And our holy fathers have also spoken in their writings about guarding the heart, as those who wish can see for themselves by reading what St Mark the Ascetic, St John of the Ladder, St Hesychios the Priest, St Philotheos of Sinai, St Isaiah the Solitary and St Barsanuphios the Great, and the entire book known as The Paradise of the Fathers [on the Desert Fathers], have to say about the subject.

In short, if you do not guard your intellect you cannot attain purity of heart, so as to be counted worthy to see God (cf. Matt. 5:18). Without such watchfulness you cannot become poor in spirit, or grieve, or hunger and thirst after righteousness, or be truly merciful, or pure in heart, or a peacemaker, or be persecuted for the sake of justice (cf. Matt. 5:3-10). **To speak generally, it is impossible to acquire all the other virtues except through watchfulness. For this reason you must pursue it more diligently than anything else,** so as to learn from experience these things, unknown to others, that I am speaking to you about.” – St. Symeon the New Theologian

“The substance of [St. Silouan the Athonite’s] ascetic path can be expressed in a few words – preserving the heart from every outside, irrelevant thought by concentrating the inner attention, by eliminating every alien influence, to stand before God in pure prayer.”
– St. Sophrony of Essex

“Inner prayer...is the most direct road to salvation. We may leave all else and turn only to this work, and all will be well. Conversely, if we fulfil all other duties and neglect this one task we shall bear no fruit. He who does not turn within and look to this spiritual task, will make no progress...A spiritual father should therefore introduce the practice of inner prayer among his children as early as possible, and confirm them in its use. It is even possible to start them in this before any exterior observances, or together with them; in any case it is essential not to leave it until too late. This is because the very seed of spiritual growth lies in this inner turning to God...cut off thoughts and you will cut off [every passion.]” – St. Theophan the Recluse

“Without unceasing mindfulness of the Lord, which gives rise to purity, free from every evil, in the heart as well as in the intellect, it is impossible to bear fruit: Without me, it says, you can do nothing.” – St. Nikodemos of Mt. Athos

“The most important task for an ascetic is to enter into his heart, to wage war against Satan, to hate him, and to battle with him by wrestling against the thoughts he provokes. If you keep your body outwardly chaste and pure, but inwardly are adulterous where God is concerned and profligate in your thoughts, then you gain nothing from keeping your body chaste.” – St. Macarius the Great

“What does a monk do? Nothing. Preserve his soul from destructive thoughts.” – St. Barsanuphios of Optina

“Strive with all your might to bring your interior activity into accord with God, and you will overcome exterior passions.” – St. Arsenios the Great

“One of the brethren asked Abba Agathon which is the better, bodily asceticism or the guarding of our inner state.

The elder replied: 'Man is like a tree: bodily asceticism is the leaves, the guarding of our inner state the fruit. Since, according to the Scriptures, "every tree that fails to produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 3:10), it is clear that all our efforts should be devoted to producing the fruit, that is, to keeping watch over our intellect. But we also need the shelter and canopy of the leaves - bodily asceticism.' – St. Agathon, one of the Desert Fathers

On spiritual guidance

“For the avoidance of errors, have someone to advise you...and make known to him all that happens to you in the work of prayer...if anyone tries to practice this by himself, merely from descriptions in books, he cannot escape illusion.” – St. Theophan the Recluse.

“The man who sets out without guidance to engage in prayer (imagining in his arrogance that he can learn to pray from books), and will not go to a spiritual director, is already half beguiled. But the Lord succors the man who is humble, and if there be no experienced guide and he turns to any confessor he finds, the Lord will watch over him for his humility.” – St. Silouan the Athonite

“Of those who reveal their thoughts and actions and who do everything with counsel the Wise One says, “in much counsel there is safety” (Proverbs 9:14). He does not say, “in the counsel of many” that is, in seeking counsel from everyone, but in seeking counsel in all things...naturally from one we trust; and not in such a way as to tell one thing and conceal another, but to reveal everything and seek counsel in all things. **For such a man, safety is assured “in much counsel”... nothing is more disastrous than to trust one’s own counsel, to be one’s own spiritual director.**” – St. Dorotheos of Gaza.

“Do nothing without questioning and counsel” – St. Barsanuphius the Great

“Reveal your thoughts to your fathers so that the grace of God dwell in you.” – St. Isaiah the Solitary

“Here on the Holy Mountain, we see that some monks are doing well while others are not. Don’t be surprised by this. Both of them came with the same piety, the same self-denial, and the same zeal that we all had when we first came to monasticism. All of us left behind our father, our mother, our job, etc. That is no great accomplishment. What is a great accomplishment, however, is to find a real elder who will guide us and instruct us and teach us what monasticism really is. The monks who are not doing well are those who did not find a real elder.” – St. Joseph the Hesychast.

“Prayer comes from obedience, not obedience from prayer.” – St. Ephraim of Katounakia