

PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

By St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki (+1360),
from the web pages of "Orthodox America"

Let no one think, my dear brothers in Christ, that the duty of praying unceasingly and always belongs only to those of priestly rank and monastics and not to laymen. No, no; all of us Christians have the duty of being always in the state of prayer. Just see what the holy Patriarch of Constantinople, Philotheus writes in the life of St. Gregory of Thessalonika:

This hierarch had a beloved friend whose name was Job, a simple man but full of good deeds. Once they were conversing and the bishop said concerning prayer that all Christians must struggle in prayer always and must pray constantly just as the Apostle Paul exhorts: pray without ceasing (I Thess.5:17); and as the prophet David says of himself [in spite of the fact that he was king and had to take care of his entire kingdom]: I beheld the Lord ever before me (Ps. 15:8), i.e., in my mind's eye I always see the Lord before me in my prayer. And St. Gregory the Theologian teaches all Christians and tells them that they should remember the name of God more often than they breathe.

Having said this and much else to his friend Job, the hierarch added that not only should we, obeying the commands of the saints, ourselves pray always, but we should teach others to do the same; all, without distinction--monks and laymen, learned and simple, men and women and children--we should urge to pray without ceasing.

Hearing this, the elderly Job thought this was something new and began to argue, telling the hierarch that to pray always was the work only of ascetics and monks "who live outside the world and its cares, and not of laymen who have so many cares and activities." The hierarch brought forth more evidence in support of this truth and new irrefutable proofs, but even these did not convince the elder Job. Then the holy Gregory, avoiding talkativeness and strife, became silent and they each went to their separate cells.

Afterwards when Job was praying alone in his cell, there appeared to him an angel sent from God, Who desired that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (I Tim. 2:4), and reproached him for arguing with St. Gregory and opposing such an evident matter on which depends the salvation of Christians. He announced from God Himself that in the future he should take heed and beware of telling anyone anything contrary to this soul-saving matter and not resist the will of God, that even in his

own mind he should not have any thought opposed to this, not allow himself to think in any way contrary to that which St. Gregory had said. Then the simple elder Job hurried to St. Gregory and falling to his feet asked his forgiveness for his opposition and strife and disclosed to him all that the angel of the Lord had said.

Now you see, my brethren, how all Christians, from the least to the greatest, must always pray within their hearts: "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" in such a way that their mind and heart would always be in the habit of pronouncing these holy words. Be assured how pleasing this is to God and how much good comes from this, when, in His infinite love for mankind, He sent an angel from heaven to reveal this to us so that no one would have any doubt about it. But what do laymen say? "We are overburdened with things to do and worldly cares. How can we pray without ceasing?"

I would answer them that God did not command us to do anything impossible, but only that which we are able to do. And therefore, this can be done by anyone who fervently seeks the salvation of his soul. If this were impossible, then it would be impossible for anyone living in the world and there would not be so very many of those who, in the midst of the world, carried on unceasing prayer as they should. Among many such people, we may take as examples the father of St. Gregory of Thessalonika, the wondrous Constantine, who, despite his involvement in the life of the court, being called the father and tutor of the Emperor Andronicus and daily occupied with affairs of state as well as with those of his own household -- he had a large estate with many servants, a wife and children -- in spite of all this, he was so inseparable from God and so attached to unceasing mental prayer, that he often forgot what it was the Emperor and his lords were discussing with him concerning matters of state, so that he often would ask and even repeat one and the same question. The other lords, not understanding the reason for this, were disturbed and reproached him for being so forgetful and burdening the Emperor with his repetitive questions. But the Emperor, knowing the reason behind all this, came to his defense and said, "Constantine has his own thoughts which sometimes do not permit him to attend fully to what we are saying."

There are countless numbers of others who, living in the world, were entirely given over to ceaseless prayer, as can be testified by historical writings. And so, my dear brothers in Christ, I entreat you -- I together with St. John Chrysostom -- for the sake of your soul's salvation, do not neglect this prayer. Imitate the example of those of whom I have spoken, and follow after them as much as possible. At first this may seem very difficult, but be assured, as if this were from the Almighty God, that the very name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ceaselessly invoked by you, will help you to overcome all difficulties, and with time you will become accustomed

to this and you will taste how sweet is the name of the Lord. Then you will know by experience that this activity is not impossible nor difficult, but both possible and easy. This is why St. Paul, knowing much better than we what great benefit comes from this prayer, exhorted us to pray without ceasing. He would not have required this of us had it been so very difficult and utterly impossible, knowing beforehand that in such a case, being unable to fulfill this task, we would inevitably be disobedient to his command and become transgressors of it and thereby make ourselves worthy of judgment and punishment. But this could not have been the Apostle's intent.

In order to pray in this way, we must bear in mind the method of prayer, how it is possible to pray without ceasing, i.e., to pray with the mind. We can always do this, if only we desire it. While we are occupied with handiwork, while we walk, while we eat or drink--we can always pray with the mind, or perform mental prayer pleasing to God, true prayer. With our body let us work, but with our soul let us pray. Let our outer man perform all his bodily activities; but let the inner man be completely given over to serving God and never cease this spiritual activity of mental prayer as Jesus the God-Man commanded us in the holy Gospel: When thou prayest, enter into the closet and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret (Matt. 6:6). The closet of the soul is the body: the doors are our five bodily senses. The soul enters its closet when the mind does not wander here and there pursuing worldly matters, but when it finds its place in our heart. Our senses shut themselves up and remain that way when we do not allow them to cling to outward sensual matters and in this way our mind remains free from all worldly attachments and by means of the hidden mental prayer, unites itself to God its Father.

"And thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly", adds the Lord. God, Who knows everything hidden, sees mental prayer and rewards with manifest and great gifts. For that is true and perfect prayer which fills the soul with divine grace and spiritual gifts--like myrrh which, the more you compress it into a vessel, makes the vessel the more fragrant. So it is with prayer: the tighter you lock it into your heart, the more it abounds with God's grace.

Blessed are they who become accustomed to this heavenly activity, for by it they conquer all the temptations of the evil spirits, just as David conquered the proud Goliath. In this way they quench the disorderly desires of the flesh, just as the three youths quenched the flames of the furnace. By means of mental prayer the passions are tamed, just as Daniel tamed the wild beasts. It draws the dew of the Holy Spirit down into the heart, just as the prayers of Elijah brought down rain upon Mt. Carmel. This mental prayer reaches the very throne of God where it is treasured in golden vials and like a censer it gives off a sweet fragrance before the Lord

just as St. John the Theologian saw in his revelation: Four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints (Rev. 5:8). This mental prayer is the light enlightening man's soul and enkindling his heart with the fire of love towards God. It is the chain uniting God to man and man to God. O, there is nothing that can compare to the grace of mental prayer! It makes man a constant converser with God. O truly wondrous and most wondrous work! In the body you are with people, but mentally you converse with God.

Angels do not have sensible voices, but mentally they offer up constant praise to God. This is their whole occupation; their entire life is dedicated to this. And you too, brother, when you enter your closet and shut the door, i.e. when your mind no longer wanders to and fro, but enters the inner recesses of your heart, and your senses are locked up and kept away from the things of the world, and in this manner you always pray, then you are like the holy angels, and your Father, seeing your secret prayer which you offer to Him out of the treasury of your heart, will bestow upon you openly great spiritual gifts. And what more do you desire from this when mentally you are always in the presence of God and converse with Him ceaselessly--you converse with God, without Whom no man can ever be blessed either here or in the other life.