

# Prayer without Ceasing.

from **The Way of the Pilgrim**

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## [God's Call to the Pilgrim.]



"**BY** the grace of God I am a Christian man, by my actions a great sinner, and by calling a homeless wanderer of the humblest birth who roams from place to place. My worldly goods are a knapsack with some dried bread in it on my back, and in my breast-pocket a Bible. And that is all.

On the 24th Sunday after Pentecost I went to church to say my prayers there during the Liturgy. The first Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians was being read, and among other words I heard these--" Pray without ceasing." It was this text, more than any other, which forced itself upon my mind, and I began to think how it was possible to pray without ceasing, since a man has to concern himself with other things also in order to make a living. I looked at my Bible, and with my own eyes read the words which I had heard, i.e, that we ought always, at all times and in all places, to pray with uplifted hands. I thought and thought, but knew not what to make of it. " What ought I to do! " I thought. " Where shall I find someone to explain it to me! I will go to the churches where famous preachers are to be heard; perhaps there I shall hear something which will throw light on it for me." I did so. I heard a number of very fine sermons on prayer; what prayer is, how much we need it, and what its fruits are; but no one said how one could succeed in prayer. I heard a sermon on spiritual prayer, and unceasing prayer, but how it was to be done was not pointed out. Thus listening to sermons failed to give me what I wanted, and having had my fill of them without gaining understanding, I gave up going to hear public sermons. I settled on another plan--by God's help to look for some experienced and skilled person who would give me in conversation that teaching about unceasing prayer which drew me so urgently.

For a long time I wandered through many places. I read my Bible always, and everywhere I asked whether there was not in the neighborhood a spiritual teacher, a devout and experienced guide, to be found..."

[Note that a spiritual director or teacher is often essential to spiritual life and growth. However we cannot often find the right person immediately so we pray the Lord will lead us to him and we search.]

"At last towards evening [one day] I was overtaken by an old man who looked like a cleric of some sort. In answer to my question he told me that he was a monk belonging to a monastery some six miles off the main road. He asked me to go there with him. " We take in pilgrims," said he, "and give them rest and food with devout persons in the guest house." I did not feel like going.<sup>1</sup> So in reply I said that my peace of mind in no way depended upon my finding a resting-place, but upon finding spiritual teaching. Neither was I running after food, for I had plenty of dried bread in my knapsack. " What sort of spiritual teaching are you wanting to get" he asked me. " What is it puzzling you !" ...



"Well, it's like this, Father", said I. "About a year ago, while I was at the Liturgy, I heard a passage from the Epistles which bade men pray without ceasing. Failing to understand, I began to read my Bible, and there also in many places I found the divine command that we ought to pray at all times, in all places; not only while about our business, not only while awake, but even during sleep, '*I sleep, but my heart waketh.*' This surprised me very much, and I was at a loss to understand how it could be carried out and in what way it was to be done. A burning desire and thirst for knowledge awoke in me. Day and night the matter was never out of my mind. So I began to go to churches and to listen to sermons. But however many I heard, from not one of them did I get any teaching about how to pray without ceasing. They always talked about getting ready for prayer, or about its fruits and the like, without teaching one *how* to pray without ceasing, or what such prayer means. I have often read the Bible and there made sure of what I have heard. But meanwhile I have not reached the understanding that I long for, and so to this hour I am still uneasy and in doubt."

Then the old man crossed himself and spoke. " Thank God, my dear brother, for having revealed to you this unappeasable desire for unceasing interior prayer. Recognize in it the call of God, and calm yourself. Rest assured that what has hitherto been accomplished In

you is the testing of the harmony of your own will with the voice of God. It has been granted to you to understand that the heavenly light of unceasing interior prayer is attained neither by the wisdom of this world, nor by the mere outward desire for knowledge, but that on the contrary it is found in poverty of spirit and in active experience in simplicity of heart. That is why it is not surprising that you have been unable to hear anything about the essential work of prayer, and to acquire the knowledge by which ceaseless activity in it is attained. Doubtless a great deal has been preached about prayer... But what is prayer! And how does one learn to pray ! Upon these questions, primary and essential as they are, one very rarely gets any precise enlightenment from present-day preachers. For these questions are more difficult to understand than all their arguments ..., and require mystical knowledge, not simply the learning of the schools. And the most deplorable thing of all is that the vain wisdom of the world compels them to apply the human standard to the divine. Many people reason quite the wrong way round about prayer, thinking that good actions and all sorts of preliminary measures render us capable of prayer. But quite the reverse is the case, it is prayer which bears fruit in good works and all the virtues... [T]he Apostle Paul says, ' I exhort therefore that first of all supplications he made ' (1 Tim. ii,1) The first thing laid down in the Apostle's words about prayer is that the work of prayer comes before everything else: ' I exhort therefore that first of all . . . ' The Christian is bound to perform many good works, but before all else what he ought to do is to pray, for without prayer no other good work whatever can be accomplished. Without prayer he cannot find the way to the Lord, he cannot understand the truth, he cannot crucify the flesh with its passions and lusts, his heart cannot be enlightened with the light of Christ... None of those things can be effected unless they are preceded by constant prayer...

### **[The basic method.]**

He took my request kindly and asked me into his cell. " Come in," said he;... We went into his cell and he began to speak as follows. " **The continuous interior Prayer of Jesus is a constant uninterrupted calling upon the divine Name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart; while forming a mental picture of His constant presence, and imploring His grace, during every occupation, at all times, in all places**, even during sleep. The appeal is couched in these terms, **Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me**. One who accustoms himself to this appeal experiences as a result so deep a consolation and so great a need to offer the prayer always, that he can no longer live without it, and it will continue to voice itself

within him of its own accord. Now do you understand what prayer without ceasing is!" (Emphasis added.)

"Yes indeed, Father, and in God's name teach me how to gain the habit of it," I cried, filled with joy.

He opened the book [*The Philokalia*], found the instruction by St. Simeon the New Theologian, and read: " Sit down alone and in silence. Lower your head, shut your eyes, breathe out gently and imagine yourself looking into your own heart. Carry your mind, i.e, your thoughts, from your head to your heart. As you breathe put, say Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' Say it moving your lips gently, or simply say it in your mind. Try to put all other thoughts aside. Be calm, be patient, and repeat the process very frequently."



I listened closely and with great delight, fixed it in my memory, and tried as far as possible to remember every detail.

[The Pilgrim found a place to stay in a village nearby. As he tried to practice this new way of prayer he found himself] "tired, lazy, bored and overwhelmingly sleepy, and a cloud of all sorts of other thoughts closed round me." [His friend and spiritual director, the monk, said] "My dear brother, it is the attack of the world of darkness upon you. To that world, nothing is worse than heartfelt prayer on our part. And it is trying by every means to hinder you and to turn you aside from learning the Prayer. But all the same the enemy only does what God see fit to allow, and no more is than is necessary for us..."<sup>2</sup>

He turned to the teaching of Nicephorus [in *The Philokalia*] and read, " ' If after a few attempts you do not succeed in reaching the realm of your heart in the way you have been taught, do what I am about to say, and by God's help you will find what you seek. The faculty of pronouncing words lies in the throat. Reject all other thoughts (you can do this if you will) and allow that faculty to repeat only the following words constantly, " Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Compel yourself to do it always. If you succeed for a time, then

without a doubt your heart also will open to prayer. We know it from experience.'

"There you have the teaching of the holy Fathers on such cases," said my [director], " and therefore you ought from today onwards to carry out my directions with confidence, and repeat the Prayer of Jesus as often as possible. **Here is a rosary.** Take it, and to start with say the Prayer three thousand times a day.

..... Whether you are standing or sitting, walking or lying down, continually repeat 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me'. Say it quietly and without hurry, but without fail exactly three thousand times a day without deliberately increasing or diminishing the number. God will help you...

[Later his director told him to say the prayer 12,000 times a day.] I did as he bade me. The first day I scarcely succeeded in finishing my task of saying twelve thousand prayers by late evening. The second day I did it easily and contentedly. To begin with, this ceaseless saying of the Prayer brought a certain amount of weariness, my tongue felt numbed, I had a stiff sort of feeling in my jaws, I had a feeling at first pleasant but afterwards slightly painful in the roof of my mouth. The thumb of my left hand, with which I counted my beads, hurt a little. I felt a slight inflammation in the whole of that wrist, and even up to the elbow, which was not unpleasant. Moreover, all this aroused me, as it were, and urged me on to frequent saying of the Prayer. For five days I did my set number of twelve thousand prayers, and as I formed the habit I found at the same time pleasure and satisfaction in it.

Early one morning the Prayer woke me up as it were. I started to say my usual morning prayers, but my tongue refused to say them easily or exactly. My whole desire was fixed upon one thing only--to say the Prayer of Jesus, and as soon as I went on with it I was filled with joy and relief. It was as though my lips and my tongue pronounced the words entirely of themselves without any urging from me. I spent the whole day in a state of the greatest contentment... [The Pilgrim wished to increase the times that he said the prayer and so went to see his spiritual director.]

He heard me out and then said, " Be thankful to God that this desire for the Prayer and this facility in it have been manifested in you. It is a natural consequence which follows constant effort and spiritual achievement.... Now you see with what admirable gifts God in His love for mankind has endowed even the bodily nature of man. You see what feelings can be produced even outside a state of grace in a soul

which is sinful and with passions unsubdued, as you yourself have experienced. But how wonderful, how delightful and how consoling a thing it is when God is pleased to grant the gift of self-acting spiritual prayer, and to cleanse the soul from all sensuality! It is a condition which is impossible to describe, and the discovery of this mystery of prayer is a foretaste on earth of the bliss of Heaven. Such happiness is reserved for those who seek after God in the simplicity of a loving heart. Now I give you my permission to say your Prayer as often as you wish and as often as you can. Try to devote every moment you are awake to the Prayer, call on the Name of Jesus Christ without counting the number of times, and submit yourself humbly to the will of God, looking to Him for help. I am sure He will not forsake you, and that He will lead you into the right path."



Under this guidance I spent the whole summer in ceaseless oral<sup>3</sup> prayer to Jesus Christ, and I felt an absolute peace in my soul..."

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"The events described in the book appear to belong to a Russia [before] ...1861. " The reference to the Crimean War in the Fourth Narrative gives 1853 as the other limit of time." "Of the Pilgrim's identity nothing is known. In some way his manuscript, or a copy of it, came into the hands of a monk on [Mount Athos](#), in whose possession it was found by the Abbot of St. Michael's Monastery at Kazan. The Abbot copied the manuscript, and from his copy the book was printed at Kazan in 1884.

In recent years [1930] copies of this ... edition have become exceedingly difficult to get. There appear to be only three or four copies in existence outside Russia, and I am deeply indebted to friends in Denmark and Bulgaria for the loan of copies from which this translation was made..." R.M.French from the introduction, p. viii.

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*The Way of a Pilgrim* and *The Pilgrim Continues His Way*, translated from the Russian by R. M. French, S.P.C.K., London, first published in 1930, reprinted in 1963, pp. 1-17.

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