

## The Prayer of the Heart and the Jesus Prayer



The roots of the “Jesus Prayer” go right back to Our Lord Himself. The words usually used are: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” A similar prayer is found in the Gospel of St Luke 18:13, in the story of the Pharisee and the Publican.

“And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The “Jesus Prayer” has several forms. But it is a simplified form of the longer “Prayer of the Heart”, which the monks were taught. It seems that the full Prayer of the Heart was kept strictly for monasteries and convents. The average person does not need it: in fact, it would be impossible to do it properly unless you had a spiritual director, preferably living in the same monastery.

In the Russian book *The Way of a Pilgrim*, the pilgrim is taken to a monastery where he learns that:

The continuous 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.”

The pilgrim is taught not just to say some words. It includes a constant and uninterrupted calling upon the divine Name of Jesus with the lips (so that it is said out loud, at least sometimes),

- in the spirit and in the heart,
- forming a mental picture of His constant presence,
- and imploring His grace.

Today, it is unusual to say the Prayer with the lips, but that method is still useful, especially if one finds that one’s attention has been wandering. Further, those words are by no means the only ones which can be used. In fact, I believe that there is a better version for people today, and that is to say:

*You are Holy, O God! Have mercy upon us!*

Or, in Syriac:

*Qadishat Aloho! Itraham alayyin!*

Not only an appeal to the person of the Lord alone (which is good), it implores the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Also, it calls to mind the holiness of God which is an important help in “forming a mental picture of His constant presence.” It helps us to remember that God is holy, meaning that he is full of goodness, truth and beauty, and that wherever He is present, we feel faith, hope and love. By having these thoughts in our hearts, at least sometimes, as we pray, we come closer to God and obtain a deeper understanding of His holiness.

This was written by a Maronite priest. Of your mercy, please pray for him.

## Method of Prayer

There are times when one should pray and do nothing but pray. There are also times to do other things. However, that does not mean that one could not pray at all at those times. The Jesus Prayer, when done properly, helps one to hear a wordless echo of the Prayer, and so to feel something, at least, of the presence of God, even when engaged in other activities. Of course, the impact of the prayer upon the soul is different when done in the midst of daily activities. It *cannot* and even *should not* be the same. Our daily activities are essential to our appointed lives on earth. Those duties are critical parts of our responsibilities. They have to be attended to and done as well as we can do them.

But if we learn to say the Jesus Prayer in calm conditions, we can then, when we come to it while walking down the road, for instance, have something of its influence in us. The deeper our prayer in those secluded conditions, the faster the connection will be made in the common conditions of life, and the deeper the sense of God, His holiness, and our approach to Him.

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In *The Way of the Pilgrim*, the young man who travels through Russia and Siberia is also read some material from the *Philokalia*, the book from which the Jesus Prayer first spread out from monasteries and convents. At first, the practice went well, but then the pilgrim started to find his mind clouding, and he began to suffer a mental and emotional distress. When he returned to the monk, he was read some more, and was given a rosary (although the Latin rosary is used differently from the Greek and Russian Orthodox rosaries). He was told to use the rosary and to say, three thousand times a day: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." The count was soon increased, but what is important is that the beads were found necessary to keep his mind steady.

The rosary is absolutely basic: it keeps you linked to the body (and stops you getting distressed), and it is a support for the attention. It also helps wonderfully with knowing how many prayers you have said, because the Jesus Prayer yields the best results when a specific number of prayers is chosen in advance, e.g. 1,000 a day, with 500 before 12 noon, and saying 500 prayers after 12 noon.

But if any of you want wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men abundantly and upbraids not. And it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavers is like a wave of the sea, which is moved and carried about by the wind. Therefore let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is inconstant in all his ways. St James 1:5-8

Whatever one decides, one should not just stick to, but *make a commitment* to. The way we begin the Prayer is vital. If we begin off in two minds, we will stumble and falter. Nothing can be more certain.

Sometimes you will find that the attention wanders while you are saying the Prayer. Do not worry about, just bring your attention back to the Prayer. This happens for many different reasons, at many different times, and almost every one suffers one or another problem.

The first problem is the weakness of our attention. We *feel* that we should be able to control it better, and we are right. We can improve our attention. There is a view among the wise that the feebleness of our attention is due to the Fall. That may be correct, but even if that is true, we can still have better attention than what we do now, and we should diligently work in that direction. One tried and proven method is to ask your holy guardian angel to help you clear your mind when you start the Prayer.

The second problem is that as we get used to the Prayer, we find we can do it in robot fashion. That is actually a sign of initial success, not of failure. It means that the psyche is becoming accustomed to it, and this will be the basis of our ability to pray while doing other activities. In that case, what we should do is *deepen* the effort. Pay *more* attention to the feel of the beads, or to sensing the air as we breathe. By making the effort finer, we move it from the robot to the human being again.

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