

Watchfulness, Prayer and Confession

by Elder Ephraim of Philotheou

Elder Ephraim emphasizes the vital roles of watchfulness, prayer, and confession in achieving spiritual purity and closeness to God.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:23, Matthew 26:41, Philippians 4:8, James 4:7, 1 Peter 5:8

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Purification Of Soul"

Description

Elder Ephraim of Philotheou delivers a sermon on the great virtue of watchfulness, emphasizing the importance of continuous attention to the nous to guard against impure thoughts and sinful images. Watchfulness, described as an axe shattering passions, leads to purity and bold prayers before God. The sermon highlights the power of thoughts in either defiling or improving the soul, stressing the need to control the senses and imagination. Through examples like Abba Paphnoutios, the sermon illustrates the significance of not judging others and the transformative impact of watchfulness in cleansing the soul and preparing for eternal life.

Transcript

My beloved children,

Today we will say a few things about the great virtue of watchfulness.

As you know, watchfulness is a patristic teaching, it is the experience of the great neptic fathers of the Church and of the desert. The word "nepsis" comes from "nepho," which means to be sleepless, to guard, to inspect, examine, watch over, keep under surveillance. All these things the fathers sum up in one continuous attention to the nous.

Watchfulness is described as the axe which shatters the large trees, hitting their roots. And when the root is struck, it doesn't spring up again. Thus also when the nous of the man, of the Christian, has heed for the soul, it keeps watch over the heart and the five senses of the soul, the bodily as well as the spiritual. When the nous is awake, when it is attentive, when it keeps watch over the speculations, the thoughts, when it controls the imagination, then the whole man, body and soul, is kept pure. And when the man is rendered pure through watchfulness and spiritual works, his prayers have boldness before God, they cross the sky, they go beyond the stars, they pass through the heavens and draw near to the Divine Throne of Grace, where the blessings of God are granted. And this being the case, the man at prayer is enriched by the grace of God.

The neptic fathers tell us that one of our thoughts may rise to heaven and another may descend to hell. "By our thoughts we are improved or defiled." In other words, a thought which may inattentively attack us, may pollute us, may pleasure us, and is able to render us worthy of hell. A heavenly thought, a thought of self-denial, a brave thought a thought of prayer and the vision of God, makes us worthy to draw near the Divine throne and to taste of heavenly things. By the thoughts either we will become unclean or we will become better. The beginning of sins starts with the thoughts.

The thoughts come from the five senses, the spiritual as well as the physical. When we allow the sense of sight to be uncontrolled and it carelessly sees anything, this carelessness will become no end of dirty and sinful images. Since these images are placed in the imagination, afterwards they drip the poison of sinful pleasure inside the heart of man. This pleasure is the poison, by which the heart is polluted and then becomes unclean and guilty before the unsleeping eye of God.

Just like the sense of sight, so it is also of touch, and also of taste and hearing and of smell. And so the five senses create analogous sinful images, which render the man unclean before the face of God. Here rests the entire philosophy of the spirit.

All sermons are beneficial, exactly because when a tree which is diseased is pruned, it is cleansed, and thus the word of God helps in the reduction of a passion. However, the teaching of the Fathers concerning watchfulness radically effects the cleansing from the passions. When the mattock, when the axe strikes the root, the entire tree falls down, it withers and is finished. So also when watchfulness takes a place in the life of the Christian, a tree of passion falls, it withers and thus in time, the old man, the man of sin and of passion, the earthly Adam is freed and he becomes "a new man." For this reason, the neptic work frees us radically from evil. Here then we must give heed to our life. If we want to cleanse ourselves, we should make sure to enrich our nous by the application of watchfulness.

A part of watchfulness is also noetic prayer. The vision of God is another part of watchfulness. Spiritual warfare is also another part. All these parts, when they are united in an effort of man, in time bring about holiness.

Abba Paphnoutios, a great desert father, was going along one day on his way and there he saw two men committing some sin. The thought of his passion said: "Look what great evil they are doing!" The eye saw them and immediately the thought flared up, trying thereby to attack the purity of the Saint's soul by judging the brother or also by his being tempted. Having watchfulness, however, he was being vigilant, immediately his mind was enlightened and he said to his thought, "They are sinning today, I will sin tomorrow. They will repent, but I know myself to be a hard man, unrepentant, egotistical, and thus, I won't repent. I will be punished since I am worse than these two. And what do I have to do about these careless sinners, since I am a much greater sinner and more passionate?" And speaking in this manner and putting a lock on the provocation of sin, he was saved and didn't judge the brothers who were sinning.

He didn't go very far and an Angel of God appeared before him having a double-edged cutless dripping blood; in other words, a knife which had cut from both sides and he says to him:

"Paphnoutios, you see this knife? Do you see that it is dripping blood?"

"I see it Angel of God."

"With this knife I kill by taking the heads of the ones who judge their neighbors. And since you didn't judge, you didn't condemn those who were in fact sinning--not imagining or guessing that they were sinners, but seeing them sin with your own eyes--but you condemned yourself more, for this reason your name has been written in the book of eternal life."

Success. His name is written in eternal life, because he didn't judge the sinners, he didn't condemn the sin of his brother. He would have judged if he hadn't had watchfulness, if he hadn't been vigilant noetically in guarding his soul. Do you see what good attention he produced? And do you see what harm he would have suffered, if he had been inattentive to the thought and allowed it to work within him! But his thought said that they were in fact sinning, he saw them. In spite of these things, however, even though the thought was spoken to him, the correct thought triumphed and thereby he escaped the shipwreck of his soul.

All of the passions have their own images, their own fantasies and their own pleasures. Murder has one image and another pleasure, gluttony has another and so many other sinful passions have others. All of the pleasures are otherwise poisons which bring about the death of the soul. We must take as our view that, if we want to clean the "inside of the cup," the interior of the soul, our heart, this center of man, we must strive to keep watchful. We should take care to become better, that is, we should be vigilant to always have our hand on the trigger. With the first appearance of the enemy, we should shoot. As soon as an evil thought comes to us, immediately knock it down. A dirty image comes, immediately spoil it. We shouldn't allow it to become more vivid in colors and in appearance, because thereby we will come to immediate difficulty. When the evil is struck at the root, it is impossible to sprout and to increase. When this struggle comes about with diligence, we will cleanse our soul and thereby we will be found clean and with boldness before God.

A pagan priest asked some monks:

"Does your God appear to you? Do you see Him? Does he speak to you?"

The fathers said:

"No."

The pagan says:

"If he doesn't speak to you and doesn't appear to you, this means that you don't have pure thoughts. When I pray, my God answers me."

Naturally, God didn't answer the pagan, the demons answered him, but nevertheless the fathers took it as an occasion of benefit and said:

"Indeed, the impure thoughts prevent man from communicating with God."

Watchfulness does nothing less than cleanse the nous and the heart from every impurity. For this reason, with a little ascetical toil, watchfulness brings about the greatest spiritual results. When we strive ascetically and aren't mindful of our thoughts, we accomplish nothing.

The Sacred Chrysostomos wrote many chapters about prayer and about wakefulness. And in the midst of them he says something very beautiful: "Prayer," he says, "is enlightenment of the soul, true

consciousness of God, a mediator between God and man, a physician of the passions, an antidote against diseases, medicine against every illness, tranquility of the soul, a guide which carries us to heaven, which doesn't revolve around the earth, which marches towards the apse of heaven. It passes over the buildings, it passes mentally through the air, it walks above the air, it passes over the whole of the stars, it opens the gates of heaven, it surpasses the angels, it transcends the Thrones and Principalities, it passes over the Cherubim and when it has passed through all of the foundation of nature, it comes near to the unapproachable Trinity. There it worships the Divinity. There it is made worthy to become an interlocutor in the Heavenly Kingdom. Through this (the prayer), the soul, which is lifted up in the air to the heavens, embraces the Lord in an inexpressible manner, exactly as the baby embraces its mother and with tears cries loudly, desiring the enjoyment of divine milk. But it seeks the things which are necessary and receives a gift superior to all visible nature.

Prayer is our venerable representative. It gladdens the heart. It gives rest to the soul. It creates within us the fear of the punishment of hell, the desire for the Kingdom of Heaven. It teaches humility, it grants awareness of sin and in general it adorns man with every good thing, like a robe adorned with all the virtues which enfold the soul. It brought a gift to Anna, Samuel, and it made known that Prophet of the Lord. This prayer also made Elias a zealot of the Lord. And it became a guide for the descent of the heavenly fire for the sacrifice. For while the priest of Baal was calling all day long to the idol, he, after he lifted up his voice which came from his pure heart and cried out through his mouth and his soul, the fire came down from heaven as a sign of the righteousness of his prayer. Since he was standing like an eagle over the altar with his fierce nature, he offered everything as a sacrifice. But the great servant of God, the zealot Elias, did this, as all that happened then, teaching us by the spirit, that we also crying loudly from the depths of our soul to God, should move the ineffable fire of the Holy Spirit to come down to the altar of our heart and to offer ourselves fully as a sacrifice to God."

All of the great fathers of the Church, especially the fathers of the desert, succeeded in becoming worthy of great gifts exclusively and only with watchfulness and vision of God [theoria]. Keeping vigil all night and coming to the vision of the Light of God.

We have St. Gregory Palamas, the instructor of the desert, the instructor of neptic activity, the teacher of noetic prayer. This saint would remain enclosed in his cell for the entire week. He didn't go outside at all. There on his knees and with hands upraised, he was vigilant about his nous and his heart and he received heavenly theology [literally "theology from above"--trans.] by the Holy Spirit. The theology which made known the Uncreated Light of the Divine Glory, of the Divine Nature.

The Uncreated Light is the glory of the Divine Nature. There was the goal and the conclusion of asceticism and of prayer. When the saints received this Light, they became all Light. And since the light floods the nous and the heart, how could they know less than the mysteries of the secrets which are known only to the angels? Through watchfulness the fathers attained to the pinnacle of the virtues and of the graces.

And we, if we are watchful, if we pray, even if we are in the world, and even if we don't attain to similar states, no matter what, we will attain to a condition of purity. When we succeed by watchfulness in not judging our brother, this is no small achievement. We put into practice the commandment of our Christ, which is as follows: "Do not judge, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged, and with what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you" (Matt. 7:1-2).

It is the commandment of Christ. It is not the commandment of some Saint. It is God's. And therefore we have put into practice a Divine commandment. When we do not judge, we will not be judged. Judge, and we will be judged. Sin is widespread. Wherever we turn our eyes and our imagination, we recognize the errors of men. Therefore, if we are inattentive, without watchfulness, we will always be found in the error of violation of this evangelical commandment of not judging our neighbor.

There was a monk in some monastery. The tempter had conquered him in negligence. He didn't do his canon, he didn't go to church, he didn't do his rule of prayer, and thus the fathers didn't know him and regarded him as negligent. The hour of death came and the fathers drew near him to see something, which perhaps God would show, in order that they may be benefited. Drawing near to the dying negligent monk, the fathers saw that he was very joyful. They were perplexed and they said in their thoughts: "Look, why is he peaceful? The negligence which he had in his life doesn't worry him? What happened to the debts which have been gathered because of sloth? His conscience doesn't rebel? It doesn't make him worry? He doesn't despair?" He continued to be joyful. They compelled him to answer their question:

"Forgive us, brother, we see you doing so-so. We know and you know that you lived in negligence and sloth in monastic duties. Now you are heading to the judgment of Christ, and you should be somewhat sorry, worried, etc. But we see you otherwise, joyful, peaceful, with hope and we question; what supports this condition of yours?"

He answered them and said:

"You are right, my fathers, that's how it is. I was negligent and didn't do what you did, but one thing I guarded in my life: not to judge my brother. I read in the Holy Gospel, where the Lord says that the one who does not judge, will not be judged. Thus I tried, at least, not to judge. And I hope in the mercy of God that I will not be judged. For this reason I am departing with faith that God will apply his word."

The fathers looked into it among themselves and said that in fact the brother was very clever and masterfully gained his salvation.

If we are watchful, we will not criticize. For with the offense of judging, immediately watchfulness will set up a barrier and the thought of judgment will be prevented from continuing. Then will happen what took place with Abba Paphnutios. And so we will escape from the sin of judging and of criticism of the tongue and our names will be written in eternal life. A man who keeps his tongue pure, both inner and outer, that is to say, the inner thought and the tongue, and does this in the knowledge of God, this is a guarantee that he is saved.

This spiritual attention becomes light and as light, illumines the path. And an illumined path of watchfulness is also a path to sacred confession. The attention illumines it, which urges the man to settle his account with God. And he is guided by the light of watchfulness to this great mystery and there he deposits the entire debt, all the uncleanness of sins. He enters into this bath and he comes out entirely clean. And I say that we must have much joy in our souls when we are accounted worthy to come into this bath. We must celebrate and thank the Lord who allowed this bath on earth, who allowed this authority of "binding and loosing." Whatever things your spiritual father looses, God also looses. Whatever the representative of God forgives, the Lord also forgives.

And when the man has been judged here below, he is not judged above in the great and fearsome judgment. It is a great occasion if the man arrives as far as that. For this reason, all those who have been

accounted worthy of this bath and continuously cleanse every soiling of the soul with this spiritual bath of the mystery of God, should have very great joy, because the door of Paradise will always be open. And even if death follows, there is no anxiety. "He is prepared and not disturbed." When the man is prepared, he is not disturbed at the approach of death. He knows that it is not possible for the word of God, which gave this authority, to be wrong. We experience it as a mystery of the Church and we see it in action and in application. When the man makes sacred confession with ardent desire, with humility, and with awareness, he feels the happiness within his soul, the lightness and the elation. A vivid proof that his sins have been forgiven. And when sins are forgiven, then every anxious and uncertain fear about the next life is removed.

Our thanks to God must be unceasing. Our thanksgiving must never stop, because we are made worthy every time we want to receive this cleansing, and every time we feel a sin, immediately turn the mind to God. "I have sinned Lord, forgive me." With this "I have sinned Lord, forgive me," God answers: "My child, you are forgiven; the power of the law is remitted. Proceed to the application of the law." And the application is beneath the petraheli (stole). There all the sinfulness of man is ended. Forgiveness is so easy! It is very wrong for man, when this forgiveness is so easy and so free, because of his egoism not to want to receive it, not to want to open the doors of paradise and walk eternally in the glory of God!

Many men say: "Man should call upon God because of one sin?" But this thing is wrong. Where is the love of God? Isn't God a father?" Yes, he is a father, but when every good moment comes for him to forgive you, why do you turn your back? Why do you not receive His mercy? Why do you refuse His embrace and go far away? Why do you accept the embrace of the devil and not of God? Perhaps your god seeks money or possessions or favors and you don't have all these things and for this reason you don't come to let go of your debt? No.

God is very rich, as we see also in the parable of the prodigal. The prodigal wanted to depart far away. He demanded that part of the possessions which belonged to him. And God gave him what he was owed as physical gifts. He didn't deprive him of them. However, he squandered these gifts, the spiritual possessions, living prodigally. And when he arrived at the wretched end, he came to his senses, he came to himself. For he was not himself when all the prodigality reigned. And when he came to himself he said: "How many serve my father and they enjoy the good things of His possessions, and I His child, par excellence His child, am in such misery that I graze pigs and am allotted husks! I will return; He is a Father, He will receive me. I will ask forgiveness and will say to him, do not receive me as Your child, neither restore me to the first adoption, but I will ask him to become one of His servants. And this will be a great thing."

When he thought these things, already the Father came out from His house and waited for him with open arms. He accepted him with all his heart and all his soul. He embraced him, he kissed him, he wept from joy, because he was dead and he was restored to life, he was lost and was found. He made him His child again with all of the wealth. He forgave everything. He cleansed him of every filth. He clothed him in the original garments. In the end, he gave him everything.

The Heavenly Father also does this when one who is a sinner returns to Him. He cleanses him, washes him, he gives the original garments of baptism, he gives him sonship and makes him worthy of His Kingdom. Everything free. When the prodigal returned, he didn't seek an account, neither did he rebuke him nor did he seek to blame him. He begins where he returned; this was sufficient for the Father. Only to say "sinner," to leave his sins with humility, to understand his mistakes and from then on everything is

loosed. But the sinful man doesn't do this. He doesn't return, he isn't humbled. He holds on to his egoism. The important thing is to get to the confessional! It's two steps. And from then on everything is finished. Yet the tears of egoism hold him. And when he comes to the hour of death and the reality of it, then he will repent and he will be remorseful, but he will be too late. In this, God respects the one who doesn't want to humble his spirit a little.

As for Lucifer, this great battalion commander, who was in the first place of the angelic hosts, what was the cause of the fall? What was the cause of the collapse, of the transformation from angels to demons? Pride and egoism. The error came from these. And as with the angels, so also with our forebears. The fall of our forebears came about from pride and egoism. Because, before God accomplished the verdict of guilt, he approached the man Adam and said to him: "Adam, why did you do this?" Adam didn't seek forgiveness, he didn't say: "God forbid, I was wrong." If he had done this, he wouldn't have been turned out from Paradise and neither would we have all this banishment and suffering today. By not saying "God forbid" all this mob of evil came about. And thus now man doesn't say "God forbid" and remains in his evil. But just say it, O God stretch out the arms of forgiveness, and he takes him in.

And again I say that because we have been made worthy to know as Orthodox Christians this mystery of sacred confession, we should have very great joy, because even if any time we fall down in some sin, into something evil, we can run immediately to correct it and to preserve the health of our souls. And when death comes, we will go to meet the Lord, cleansed, repentant, as prodigal sons returned, for our Heavenly Father accepts us and places us in the Paradise of eternal bliss which has no end, which has no conclusion to that bliss, which cannot be compared to anything earthly.

And even the Apostle Paul, who went up to the third heaven and saw the eternal good things, nevertheless was unable with his apostolic and graceful tongue to express with human words, the things of Paradise and the life above! So inexpressible is the happiness of the attainment through sacred confession.

Therefore with much yearning, with much love, with much awareness we should run to be cleansed, to be made ready and when death follows, to depart in peace. Amen.

Translated from the Greek by Fr. Seraphim Bell, pastor of St. Silouan the Athonite Orthodox Church in Walla Walla, WA. This was Homily 12 from The Art of Salvation [in Greek], Vol A.

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Father Seraphim Bell Responds to a Reader's Criticism of this Homily

An Orthodox Christian who read this homily by Elder Ephraim of Arizona wrote to the Orthodox Christian Information Center the following:

The article on Nepsis seemed very good--until we reach certain aspects of the mythology of a meeting with "the Angel of God":

"He didn't go very far and an Angel of God appeared before him having a double-edged cutless dripping blood; in other words, a knife which had cut from both sides and he says to him:

'Paphnoutios, you see this knife? Do you see that it is dripping blood?'

'I see it Angel of God.'

'With this knife I kill by taking the heads of the ones who judge their neighbors...'"

This supposed incident is so far removed from anything in our fathers' or mothers' teachings that it reveals the skewered view of "god" as a vengeful, pagan god who requires blood from sinners (i.e. Latin influence of Atonement theory perhaps). This view of God has a place in Calvinism--and Augustinianism--but certainly is not how God has revealed Himself to us in Holy Scriptures and in the Person of Christ Jesus!

"Nepsis" requires us to Watch AND beware of false prophets!

The translator of this homily, Father Seraphim Bell, replied as follows:

I know this woman. She approaches our Holy Tradition in a very Western rationalistic way. She is a literalist. As she passes through the meadow of Holy Tradition, whenever she trips over the flowers of this Tradition, she simply uproots them. And in this way, she believes she actually upholds the Tradition.

Her treatment of our holy Father Paphnoutios is but one example. The vision offends her mind and so she deals with it in a very carnal, rationalistic manner. She discards it. And she does so in the name of the Tradition which she is mutilating.

St. Makarios once had a vision of Satan walking about with a feather. St. Makarios asked him what he was doing with the feather and he replied that he used it to tickle the monks to sleep. Now she would read that and believe that we are being told that Satan has a literal feather and actually tickles monks with it. Since such a thing is nonsense to her carnal mind, she would refer to this as a "supposed incident" and declare unilaterally that it is "so far removed from anything in our fathers' or mothers' teachings..."

St. Anthony once had a vision in which he saw Satan setting so many terrible traps for mankind that one couldn't take one step without falling into them. He despaired and cried out to God, "if this is how it is, how can anyone be saved?" Were she consistent she would take this in a literalist fashion and it would offend her carnal mind, and so she must reject it.

Does she think that Satan actually set those mechanical traps that Anthony saw? She seems incapable of understanding the spiritual nature of visions which our holy Fathers have had and the purpose for them.

Even though blessed Fr. Seraphim Rose warns his readers not to think in a literal rationalistic manner about tollhouses, she ignores this warning and falls into the trap that Fr. Seraphim sought to warn her about.

Of course Satan doesn't have a literal physical feather, nor does he set actual mechanical traps for us. Nor does an angel go about with a real physical sword, dripping with blood, beheading individuals. Nor are there actual booths in the sky with demons exacting a toll.

She misses entirely the spiritual nature of these visions and their intent. Each one is meant to lead us to watchfulness, to humility, to self-criticism, to repentance, etc. Each vision is startling, dramatic, unearthly and acts powerfully upon the saint to impress upon him these spiritual realities as realities!

But spiritual realities offend this woman's carnal mind and so she rejects them. She pretends not only that our Holy Father Paphnoutios did not have such a vision, but that such a thing is completely foreign to "our fathers' or mothers' teachings," when in reality, such things permeate the Holy Tradition. By implication,

anyone who passes on this Tradition is a "false prophet" (because she says so!).

What is foreign to "our fathers' or mothers' teachings" is her arbitrary picking and choosing among the meadow of Patristic writings. She can accept only what her rational mind allows her to accept. She sets herself as judge of the Tradition, which is typical of American Catholics and Protestants. She has yet to be converted to an Orthodox mind.

For this reason, as with so many Catholics and Protestants, Orthodox spirituality is a fascinating and scintillating theory for her. But she remains far from entering into its reality.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/elder-ephraim-of-philotheou/watchfulness-prayer-and-confession/>

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