

Step 28 on Holy and Blessed Prayer, Mother of Virtues, and on the Attitude of Mind and Body in Prayer

by St. John Climacus

Prayer is the converse and union of man with God, and by reason of its action upholds the world and brings about reconciliation with God.

Scripture: Psalm 51:17, Psalm 145:18, Matthew 11:28, Luke 18:1, Romans 12:12, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, James 5:16

Topics: "Christian Prayer", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

St. John Climacus emphasizes the profound nature and significance of prayer as the means of connecting with God, upholding the world, and seeking reconciliation with Him. He highlights the various aspects of prayer such as being a source of tears, a bridge over temptations, and a demonstration of hope. St. John Climacus encourages believers to approach prayer with humility, simplicity, and sincerity, emphasizing the importance of preparation and the attitude of the heart during prayer.

Transcript

1. Prayer by reason of its nature is the converse and union of man with God, and by reason of its action upholds the world and brings about reconciliation with God; it is the mother and also the daughter of tears, the propitiation for sins, a bridge over temptations, a wall against afflictions, a crushing of conflicts, work of angels, food of all the spiritual beings, future gladness, boundless activity, the spring of virtues, the source of graces, invisible progress, food of the soul, the enlightening of the mind, an axe for despair, a demonstration of hope, the annulling of sorrow, the wealth of monks, the treasure of solitaires, the reduction of anger, the mirror of progress, the realization of success, a proof of one's condition, a revelation of the future, a sign of glory. For him who truly prays, prayer is the court, the judgment hall and the tribunal of the Lord before the judgment to come.

2. Let us rise and listen to what that holy queen of the virtues cries with a loud voice and says to us: Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and you shall find rest for your souls and healing for your wounds. For My yoke is easy⁶ and is a sovereign remedy for great sins.

3. If we wish to stand before our King and God and converse with Him we must not rush into this without preparation, lest, seeing us from afar without weapons and suitable clothing for those who stand before the King, He should order His servants and slaves to seize us and banish us from His presence and tear up our petitions and throw them in our face.

4. When you are going to stand before the Lord, let the garment of your soul be woven throughout with the thread that has become oblivious of wrongs. Otherwise, prayer will bring you no benefit.

1 Philippians ii, 3.

2 Lit. 'in the gatherings', or 'assemblies'.

3 St. Pachomius thus resisted sleep and remained in vigil.

4 In the Holy Trinity there are three Persons, but in Christ one Person; in the Trinity there is one nature, but in

Christ two natures.

5 Romans xi, 34.

6 St. Matthew xi, 28-30.

5. Let your prayer be completely simple. For both the publican and the prodigal son were reconciled to God by a single phrase.

6. The attitude of prayer is one and the same for all, but there are many kinds of prayer and many different prayers. Some converse with God as with a friend and master, interceding with praise and petition not for themselves but for others. Some strive for more (spiritual) riches and glory and for confidence in prayer. Others ask for complete deliverance from their adversary.¹ Some beg to receive some kind of rank; others for complete forgiveness of debts. Some ask to be released from prison; others for remission of accusations.

7. Before all else let us list sincere thanksgiving first on our prayer-card. On the second line we should put confession, and heartfelt contrition of soul. Then let us present our petition to the King of all. This is the best way of prayer, as it was shown to one of the brethren by an angel of the Lord.

8. If you have ever been under trial before an earthly judge, you will not need any other pattern for your attitude in prayer. But if you have never stood before a judge yourself and have not seen others being cross-questioned, then learn at least from the way the sick implore the surgeons when they are about to be operated on or cauterized.

9. Do not be over-sophisticated in the words you use when praying, because the simple and unadorned lisping of children has often won the heart of their heavenly Father.

10. Do not attempt to talk much when you pray lest your mind be distracted in searching for words. One word of the publican propitiated God, and one cry of faith saved the thief. Loquacity in prayer often distracts the mind and leads to phantasy, whereas brevity² makes for concentration.

11. If you feel sweetness or compunction at some word of your prayer, dwell on it; for then our guardian angel is praying with us.

12. Do not be bold, even though you may have attained purity; but rather approach with great humility, and you will receive still more boldness.

13. Though you may have climbed the whole ladder of the virtues, pray for forgiveness of sins. Listen to the cry of Paul regarding sinners: Of whom I am the first.³

14. Oil and salt are seasonings for food; and tears and chastity give wings to prayer.

15. If you are clothed in all meekness and freedom from anger, you will not have much trouble in loosing your mind from captivity.

16. Until we have acquired genuine prayer we are like people teaching children to begin to walk.

17. Try to lift up, or rather, to shut off your thought within the words of your prayer, and if in its infant state it wearies and falls, lift it up again. Instability is natural to the mind, but God is powerful to establish everything. If you persevere indefatigably in this labour, He who sets the bounds to the sea of the mind will visit you too, and during your prayer will say to the waves: Thus far shalt thou come and no further.⁴ Spirit cannot be bound; but where the Creator of the spirit is, everything obeys.

18. If you have ever seen the Sun⁵ as you ought, you will also be able to converse with Him fitly. But if not, how can you truly hold converse with what you have not seen?

1 Cf. Step 5: 25.

2 Gk. monologia, repetition of a single word or sentence. 3 1 Timothy i 15.

4 Job xxxviii, 11

5 I.e. God, the Sun of Righteousness.

19. The beginning of prayer consists in banishing the thoughts that come to us by single ejaculations¹ the very moment that they appear; the middle stage consists in confining our minds to what is being said and thought; and its perfection is rapture in the Lord.

20. One kind of joy occurs at the time of prayer for those living in a community, and another comes to those who pray as solitaires. The one is perhaps somewhat elated, but the other is wholly filled with humility.

21. If you constantly train your mind never to wander, then it will be near you during meals too. But if it wanders unrestrained, then it will never stay beside you. A great practiser of high and perfect prayer says: 'I would rather speak five words with my understanding,'² and so on. But such prayer is foreign to infant souls. Therefore, imperfect as we are, we need not only quality but a considerable time for our prayer, because the latter paves the way for the former. For it is said: 'Giving pure prayer to him who prays³ resolutely, even though sordidly and laboriously.'

22. Soiled prayer is one thing, its disappearance is another, robbery another, and defection another. Prayer is soiled when we stand before God and picture to ourselves irrelevant and inopportune thoughts.

Prayer is lost when we are captured by useless cares. Prayer is stolen from us when our thoughts wander before we realize it. Prayer is spoilt by any kind of attack or interruption that comes to us at the time of prayer.

23. If we are not alone at the time of prayer, then let us imprint within ourselves the character of one who prays. But if the ministers of praise are not with us, we may make even our outward attitude conform to a state of prayer. For in the case of the imperfect, the mind often conforms to the body.

24. For everyone, and especially for those who have come to the King in order to receive remission of their debt, unutterable contrition is necessary. As long as we are still in prison let us listen to Him who speaks to Peter:⁴ Put on the garment of obedience, cast off your own wishes and, stripped of them, approach the Lord in your prayer, invoking His will alone. Then you will receive God, who guides the helm of your soul and pilots you safely.

25. Rise from love of the world and love of pleasure, lay aside cares, strip your mind, renounce your body; because prayer is nothing other than estrangement from the world, visible and invisible. For what have I in heaven? Nothing. And what have I desired on earth beside Thee? Nothing, but to cling continually to Thee in prayer without distraction. To some, wealth is pleasant, to others, glory, to others, possessions, but my wish is to cling to God, and to put the hope⁵ of my dispassion in Him.

26. Faith gives wings to prayer, and without it we cannot fly up to heaven.

27. We who are passionate must constantly pray to the Lord. For all passionate people who have achieved dispassion have only done so by vanquishing their passions.

28. Though the judge did not fear God, yet because a soul, widowed from Him through sin and a fall, troubles Him, He will avenge her of her adversary, the body, and of the spirits who make war upon her.⁶ Our good Redeemer attracts to His love those who are charitable by the quick satisfaction of their petitions. But He makes thoughtless souls remain in prayer before Him for a long time, in hunger and thirst for their petition; for an ill-conditioned cur when once it gets its bread makes off with it and leaves the giver.

1 Gk. monologist[■]s. This may mean by single words of prayer.

2 1 Corinthians xiv, 19; the passage continues, 'than the thousand words in a tongue'. 3 Kings ii, 9 (the Septuagint differs from the A.V. and R.V. here).

4 Cf. Acts xii, 8.

5 Psalm lxxii, 25--8.

6 St. Luke xviii, 1--7.

29. Do not say, after spending a long time at prayer, that nothing has been gained; for you have already gained something. And what higher good is there than to cling to the Lord and persevere in unceasing union with Him?

30. A convict does not fear his sentence of punishment so much as a fervent man of prayer fears this duty of prayer. So if he is wise and shrewd, by remembering this he can avoid every reproach, and anger, and worry, and interruption, and affliction, and satiety, and temptation, and distracting thought.

31. Prepare yourself for your set times of prayer by unceasing prayer in your soul, and you will soon make progress. I have seen those who shone in obedience and who tried, as far as they could, to keep in mind the remembrance of God, and the moment they stood in prayer they were at once masters of their minds, and shed streams of tears; because they were prepared for this beforehand by holy obedience.

32. Psalmody in a crowded congregation is accompanied by captivity and wandering of thoughts; but in solitude this does not happen. However, those in solitude are liable to be assailed by despondency, whereas in the former the brethren help each other by their zeal.

33. War proves the soldier's love for his king; but the time and discipline of prayer show the monk's love for God.

34. Your prayer will show you what condition you are in. Theologians say that prayer is the monk's mirror.

35. He who is busy with something and continues it when the hour of prayer comes, is deceived by the demons. Those thieves aim at stealing from us one hour after another.

36. Do not beg off when asked to pray for the soul of another, even though you have not yet obtained the gift of prayer; because the faith of the suppliant also frequently saves the one who prays for him with contrition.

37. Do not get excited if you have prayed for another and been heard, for it is his faith that has been strong and effective.

38. Each lesson that a child learns from his teacher he will be expected to know day by day without fail; and it is right that a reckoning should be required of each prayer that we engage in, so that we know what power has been received from God. Therefore, we must attend to the matter. When you have prayed soberly, you will soon be fighting against fits of temper. For this is what our enemies aim at.

39. We should always perform every virtue, especially prayer, with great feeling. A soul prays with feeling when it gets the better of temper and anger.

40. What is obtained by frequent and prolonged prayer is lasting.

41. He who has found the Lord will no longer explain the object of his prayer, for then the Spirit Himself makes intercession for him within him with unutterable groanings.¹

42. During prayer do not admit any sensory imagination, so as not to be subject to distraction.

43. The assurance of every petition becomes evident during prayer. Assurance is loss of doubt. Assurance is sure proof of the unprovable.

44. Be very merciful if you care about prayer. For through mercy monks shall receive a hundredfold,² and the rest in the future life.

45. When the fire comes to dwell in the heart, it revives prayer; and after its resurrection and ascension to heaven, a descent of fire into the cenacle of the soul takes place.

¹ Romans viii, 26.

² St. Matthew xix, 29.

46. Some say that prayer is better than the remembrance of death, but I praise two natures in one person.¹

47. A good horse when mounted warms up and quickens its pace. By pace I mean psalm-singing; and by horse, a resolute mind. He scents the battle from afar,² he is all ready, and remains master of the field.

48. It is cruel to snatch water from the mouth of a thirsty person but it is still more cruel for a soul that is praying with compunction to be torn away from its beloved task before it has finished its prayer.

49. Do not abandon prayer until you see that, by divine providence, the fire and water³ have fallen off. For you will not have such a moment for the remission of your sins again in all your life perhaps.

50. By blurting out one careless word he who has tasted prayer often defiles his mind, and then when he stands in prayer he no longer attains his desire as before.

51. It is one thing frequently to keep watch over the heart, and another to supervise the heart by means of the mind, that ruler and bishop that offers spiritual sacrifices to Christ. When the holy and heavenly fire comes to dwell in the souls of the former, as says one of those who have received the title of Theologian,⁴ it burns them because they still lack purification, whereas it enlightens the latter according to the degree of their perfection. For one and the same fire is called both the fire which consumes and the light which illuminates.⁵ That is why some people come from prayer as if they were marching out of a fiery furnace and feel relief as from some defilement and from all that is material, while others are as if illumined with light and clothed in a garment of joy and humility. But those who come from prayer without experiencing either of these two effects have prayed bodily (not to say after the Jewish fashion), and not spiritually.

52. If a body is changed in its activity from contact with another body, then how can he remain unchanged who touches the body of God with innocent hands?⁶

53. We see that our all-good King, like an earthly king, sometimes distributes His gifts to his warriors Himself, sometimes through a friend, sometimes through a slave, and sometimes in an unknown way; and it will be according to the garment of humility that each of us wears.

54. Just as an earthly king is disgusted by a man who turns his face away and talks to his master's enemies while in his presence, so will the Lord be disgusted by a man who admits unclean thoughts during his set time of prayer.

55. Drive away with this stick the dog that keeps on coming, and however often he tries it on, never give in to him.

56. Ask with tears, seek with obedience, knock with patience. For thus he who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.⁷

57. Take care when you pray not to overdo your intercessions for the other sex, so as not to be tricked from the right side.⁸

58. Do not go into detail in confessing physical acts lest you become a traitor to yourself.

1 A loving nature (prayer) and a fearful nature (remembrance of death), just as Christ has His divine and human natures united in one Person.

2 Job xxxix, 25.

3 I.e. fervour and tears.

4 St. Gregory Nazianzen, Or. 40.

5 Hebrews xii, 29; St. John 1, 9.

6 This refers to the power of the Body of Christ in Holy Communion. 7 St. Matthew vii, 8.

8 The shield being on the left arm, the right was the unguarded side.

59. Do not let the time of prayer be an hour for considering necessary things or even spiritual tasks, otherwise you will lose the better part.¹

60. He who keeps constant hold of the staff of prayer will not stumble. And even if he does, his fall will not be fatal. For prayer is a devout coercion of God.²

61. The benefit of prayer can be inferred from the assaults of the demons during the divine office; and its fruit from the defeat of the foe. But this I know that Thou favourest me because my enemy will never triumph over me³ in the time of battle. I called with my whole heart, says the Psalmist,⁴ that is, with body, soul and spirit. For where the two last are gathered together, there God is in the midst of them.⁵

62. We have not all got the same needs, neither as regards the body nor as regards the spirit. For brisk chanting suits some, and more leisurely singing suits others. For the former are struggling with captivity of the mind, and the latter with ignorance.

63. If you constantly converse with the King concerning your enemies, take courage when they attack you. You will not labour long, for they will soon retire of their own accord. These unholy spirits do not want to see you receive a crown for your struggle against them through prayer. And moreover, they will flee as from fire when scourged by prayer.

64. Have all courage, and you will have God for your teacher in prayer. Just as it is impossible to learn to see by word of mouth because seeing depends on one's own natural sight, so it is impossible to realize the beauty of prayer from the teaching of others. Prayer has a Teacher all its own--God--who teaches man knowledge,⁶ and grants the prayer of him who prays, and blesses the years of the just.⁷ Amen.

1 Cf. St. Luke x, 42.

2 St. Luke xviii, 5.

3 Psalm xl, 12.

4 Psalm cxviii, 145.

5 St. Matthew xviii, 20. The two are soul and spirit. 6 Psalm xciii, 10.

7 Kings ii, 9 (cf. above, p. 121, note 474).

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