

# The Three Methods of Prayer

## The teachings of St. Simeon the New Theologian

### THE THREE METHODS OF PRAYER

BEGIN -- There are three methods of prayer and attentiveness, by means of which the soul is either uplifted or cast down. Whoever employs these methods at the right time is uplifted, but whoever employs them foolishly and at the wrong time is cast down. Vigilance and prayer should be as closely linked together as the body to the soul, for the one cannot stand without the other. Vigilance first goes on ahead like a scout and engages sin in combat. Prayer then follows afterwards, and instantly destroys and exterminates all the evil thoughts with which vigilance has already been battling, for attentiveness alone cannot exterminate them. This, then, is the gate of life and death. If by means of vigilance we keep prayer pure, we make progress; but if we leave prayer unguarded and permit it to be defiled, our efforts are null and void.

Since, then, as we said, there are three methods of attentiveness and prayer, we should explain the distinctive features of each, so that he who aspires to attain life and wishes to set to work may with firm assurance select what suits him best; otherwise through ignorance he may choose what is worse and forfeit what is better.

### THE FIRST METHOD OF PRAYER

The distinctive features of the first method of prayer are these. When a person stands at prayer, he raises hands, eyes and intellect heavenwards, and fills his intellect with divine thoughts, with images of celestial beauty, of the angelic hosts, of the abodes of the righteous. In brief, at the time of prayer he assembles in his intellect all that he has heard from Holy Scripture and so rouses his soul to divine longing as he gazes towards heaven, and sometimes he sheds tears. But when someone prays in this way, without him realizing it his heart grows proud and exalted, and he regards what is happening to him as the effect of divine grace and entreats God to allow him always to be engaged in this activity. Such assumptions, however, are signs of delusion, because the good is not good when it is not done in the right way.

If, then, such a person is pursuing a life of stillness and seclusion, he will almost inevitably become deranged. And even if this does not happen to him, it will be impossible for him to attain a state of holiness or dispassion. Those who adopt this method of prayer have also been deluded into thinking that they see lights with their bodily eyes, smell sweet scents, hear voices, and so on. Some have become completely possessed by demons and wander from place to place in their madness. Others fail to recognize the devil when he transforms himself into an angel of light (II Corinthians 2:14); and, putting their trust in him, they continue in an incorrigible state of delusion until their death, refusing to accept the counsel of anyone else. Still others, incited by the devil, have committed suicide, throwing themselves over a precipice or hanging themselves.

Indeed, who can describe all the various forms of deception employed by the devil? Yet from what we have said any sane person can understand the kind of harm that may result from this method of attentiveness. Even if someone who has adopted this method may perhaps avoid the evils we have mentioned because he lives in a community -- for it is solitaries who are especially subject to them -- none the less he will pass his entire life without making any progress.

## THE SECOND METHOD OF PRAYER

The second form of prayer is this. A person withdraws his intellect from sensory things and concentrates it in himself, guards his senses, and collects all his thoughts; and he advances oblivious of the vanities of this world. Sometimes he examines his thoughts, sometimes pays attention to the words of the prayer he is addressing to God, and sometimes drags back his thoughts when they have been taken captive; and when he is overcome by passion he forcefully strives to recover himself.

One who struggles in this way, however, can never be at peace or win the crown of victory. He is like a person fighting at night: he hears the voices of his enemies and is wounded by them, but he cannot see clearly who they are, where they come from, and how and for what purpose they assail him. Such is the damage done to him because of the darkness in his intellect. Fighting in this manner, he cannot ever escape his noetic enemies, but is worn out by them. For all his efforts he gains nothing. Falsely imagining that he is concentrated and attentive, he falls victim unawares to self-esteem. Dominated and mocked by it, he despises and criticizes others for their lack of attentiveness. Imagining that he is capable of becoming the shepherd of sheep, he is like the blind man who undertakes to lead the blind (Matthew 15:14).

Such are the characteristics of the second method of prayer, and everyone one striving after salvation can see what harm it does. Yet this second method is better than the first, just as a moonlit night is better than a night that is pitch-dark and starless.

## THE THIRD METHOD OF PRAYER

-- Let us now begin to speak about the third method of prayer, which is truly astonishing and hard to explain. For those ignorant of it, it is not only difficult to understand but virtually incredible, and there are very few to be found who practice it. It seems to me that it has deserted us along with the virtue of obedience. For it is the love of obedience that delivers us from entanglement with this evil world, rendering us free from anxiety and impassioned craving. It makes us wholehearted and unflagging in pursuit of our aim -- provided, of course, that we find an unerring guide. For if through obedience you make yourself dead to every worldly and bodily attachment, how can anything transient enslave your intellect? If you entrust all the care of your soul and body to God and to your spiritual father, no longer living for yourself or desiring the good opinion of others, what anxiety can distract you?

-- This third method, then, destroys the invisible wiles of the demons, with which as with ropes they seek to drag down the intellect into all manner of devious thoughts. Set at liberty, the intellect wages war with its full strength, scrutinizing the thoughts insinuated by the enemy and with masterful dexterity expelling them, while the heart in its purity offers prayers to God. This is

the beginning of a life of true seclusion, and those who fail to make such a beginning exhaust themselves in vain.

-- The starting point of this third method of prayer is not to gaze upwards, to raise one's hands aloft, to concentrate one's thoughts and to call down help from heaven. These, as we said, are the marks of the first form of delusion. Nor does it begin, as the second method does, by keeping guard over the senses with the intellect, while failing to observe the enemies who attack from within. In such a case, a person is struck by the demons instead of striking them; when wounded he is unaware of it; taken captive, he cannot retaliate against his captors. His enemies constantly attack him, and from behind and even face to face, and fill him with self-esteem and arrogance.

-- If you desire to embark on this light-giving and joyful task, begin as follows. You must first practice exact obedience, as described above, and so act always with a pure conscience; for without obedience it is impossible for your conscience to be pure. And you must keep your conscience pure in three respects: first, with respect to God, you must keep your conscience pure by refraining from doing anything that conflicts with the worship due to Him. With respect to your spiritual father do everything he tells you to do, neither more nor less, and be guided by his purpose and will. With respect to other people, you must keep your conscience pure by not doing to them anything that you hate (Tobit 4:15) and that you do not want them to do to you. With respect to material things, you must take care not to misuse them, whether food, drink, or clothing. In brief, do everything as if you were in the presence of God, so that your conscience does not rebuke you in any way.

-- . . . In short, if you do not guard your intellect you cannot attain purity of heart, so as to be counted worthy to see God (Matthew 5:18). Without such watchfulness you cannot become poor in spirit, or grieve, or hunger and thirst after righteousness, or be truly merciful, or pure in heart, or a peacemaker, or be persecuted for the sake of justice (Matthew 5:3-10). To speak generally, it is impossible to acquire all the other virtues except through watchfulness. For this reason you must pursue it more diligently than anything else, so as to learn from experience these things, unknown to others, that I am speaking to you about. Now if you would like to learn also about the method of prayer, with God's help I will tell you about this too, in so far as I can.

-- Above all else you should strive to acquire three things, and so begin to attain what you seek. The first is freedom from anxiety with respect to everything, whether reasonable or senseless -- in other words, you should be dead to everything. Secondly, you should strive to preserve a pure conscience, so that it has nothing to reproach you with. Thirdly, you should be completely detached, so that your thoughts incline towards nothing worldly, not even your own body.

-- Then sit down in a quiet cell, in a corner by yourself, and do what I tell you. Close the door, and withdraw your intellect from everything worthless and transient. Rest your head on your chest, and focus your physical gaze, together with the whole of your intellect, upon the center of your belly or your navel. Restrain the drawing-in of breath through your nostrils, so as not to breathe easily, and search inside yourself with your intellect so as to find the place of the heart, where all the powers of the soul reside. To start with you will find there darkness and an impenetrable density. Later, when you persist and practice this task day and night, you will find, as though miraculously, an unceasing joy. For as soon as the intellect attains the place of the heart, at once it sees things of which it previously knew nothing. It sees the open space within the heart and it beholds itself entirely luminous and full of discrimination. From then on, from whatever side a distractive thought may appear, before it has come to completion and assumed

a form, the intellect immediately drives it away and destroys it with the invocation of Jesus Christ. From this point onwards the intellect begins to be full of rancor against the demons and, rousing its natural anger against its noetic enemies, it pursues them and strikes them down. The rest you will learn for yourself, with God's help, by keeping guard over your intellect and by retaining Jesus in your heart. As the saying does, "Sit in your cell and it will teach you everything."

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