

All Christians are urged to pray Unceasingly

By St. Nikodemos,
of the Holy Mountain

"Pray without ceasing."

I Thess. 5:17

Let no one think, my fellow Christians, that only the clergy and the monks are urged to pray unceasingly and at all times, and not also the laity. Oh, no! All of us Christians are obliged to pray always, as well. To demonstrate this, Philotheos, that most-holy Patriarch of Constantinople, writes the following, in his biography of St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica. The divine Gregory had a beloved friend named Job, a very simple man of great virtue. Once when they were conversing, Gregory told him about prayer, that each Christian individually ought always to make an effort to pray, and to pray unceasingly, as the Apostle Paul exhorts all Christians in common, "Pray without ceasing," and as the Prophet David says, even though he was king and had all those cares of ruling his kingdom: "I behold the Lord before me always;" that is noetically, by means of prayer, I see the Lord in front of me all the time.

Gregory the Theologian teaches all Christians, that we should remember the name of God in prayer more often than we breathe. Having said all this and more to his friend Job, the Saint added that we ought to obey the injunctions of the saints, and that we ourselves should not only always pray, but we should instruct also everyone else to do the same, monks and lay people, educated or not, men, women, and children; and should encourage them to pray unceasingly.

When the elder Job heard this, it seemed to him that it was an innovation, and he began to argue, and to say to Gregory that to pray always was only for the ascetics and the monks living away from the world and its distractions, and not for lay people who have jobs and so many cares. The saint responded with more examples and irrefutable proof, but the elder Job was not convinced. So, wishing to avoid talkativeness and argument, Gregory held his tongue, and each went to his cell.

Later, as Job was praying in his cell, an angel appeared before him, sent from God Who desires the salvation of all men. The angel sternly rebuked him for arguing with Gregory, and for opposing what was obvious, and that clearly effects the salvation of Christians. He admonished him on behalf of God to be careful from now on, and to beware never again to say something against such a soul-edifying work, for in so doing he would be opposing the will of God. Not even mentally should he ever again dare to harbor any thought contrary to this, or to think otherwise than the divine Gregory had told him. Then that most simple elder went at once to Gregory, and falling at his feet, begged forgiveness for contradicting and arguing; and he revealed to him all that the angel of the Lord had said to him.

Do you see, my brethren, how all Christians, small and great, should always pray, using the noetic prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me;" and how their mind and heart should become accustomed to saying it always? Just think how pleasing this is to God, and how much good comes from it, that out of His extreme love for mankind He even sent a heavenly angel to reveal it to us, so that we should no longer have any doubt about it. But what do lay people say? "We are involved in so many matters and cares of the world. How can we possibly pray without ceasing?" My answer to them is that God has not commanded us

to do anything impossible, but He has commanded us to do all those things that we are able to do. Therefore, this too can be accomplished by anyone who diligently seeks the salvation of his soul. For if it were impossible, it would be so for all lay people, and there would never have been so many in the world who did accomplish it.

That is why the divine Apostle Paul, knowing better than we do the great benefit of prayer, commanded us to pray unceasingly. He would never have advised us to do something too difficult or impossible; for if we were incapable, it follows that we would necessarily appear to be disobedient and transgressors of his commandment, and thus we would be condemned. But what the Apostle meant in saying, "Pray without ceasing," was that we should pray with our nous, which we can always do.

For whether we are working with our hands, or walking, or sitting, or eating and drinking, we can always pray with our mind and do noetic prayer that is pleasing to God and true. We can work with our body and pray with our soul. The outer man performs all bodily functions, and the inner man is entirely devoted to the worship of God, and never ceases from this spiritual work of noetic prayer.

Our Divine-Human Lord Jesus Himself so commands us in the Holy Gospel, saying, "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father Who is in secret" (Matthew 6:6.) The room of the soul is the body; the doors are our five senses. The soul enters its room when the mind does not wander to and fro among worldly things, but remains within our heart. Our senses close and remain closed when we do not allow them to cling to outward sensible things.

In this way, our mind remains free from every worldly attachment; and through secret noetic prayer, you are united with

God your Father. And then, as He says, "your Father Who sees you in secret will reward you openly." God, Who knows what is secret, sees your noetic prayer and rewards it with great and manifest gifts, for this prayer is true and perfect prayer, and it fills the soul with divine grace and spiritual gifts. It is like perfume: the tighter you stop the vessel, the more fragrant the vessel becomes. So too with prayer: the more you confine it within your heart, the more it fills you with divine grace.

Blessed and lucky are those who accustom themselves to this heavenly work, for they overcome every temptation of the wicked demons by it, like David prevailed over the proud Goliath; they put out the inordinate desires of the flesh by it, as the three youths put out the flames of the furnace. By this noetic work of prayer, they calm the passions, like Daniel tamed the wild lions; by it they bring down into their hearts the dew of the Holy Spirit, like Elias brought down the rain on Mount Carmel. It is this noetic prayer that rises to the throne of God and is kept in the golden bowls, so that the Lord can be incensed with it, like John the Theologian says in Revelation, "and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints," (Revelation 5:8).

This noetic prayer is a light that ever illumines a man's soul and ignites his heart with the flames of the love of God. It is a chain that keeps God united with a man and joined together. What could you want that is more or greater than this, when, like I said, you are noetically always with God and constantly talking with Him: Him without Whom none can ever be happy, neither here nor in the next life?