

Prayer is a painful and bloody struggle

By Elder Ephraim of Katounakia

Video with English text: <https://youtu.be/zr5qtPg9hfc>

From the YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEmEaTVBP4Aek4VvNv6ktPA>

The Elder can also be heard saying the Jesus Prayer in the video

Transcript

(Note: these practices are only for Orthodox Christians who strive to live according to God's Commandments and who also have a blessing from their spiritual father to engage in such struggles. They may prove harmful otherwise...)

Prayer is a struggle. It strengthens the fight of the faithful against the devil but it is itself also a painful and bloody struggle. All our effort is to concentrate our nous on the words of the "Jesus Prayer.

We should make our nous deaf and mute to any other thought, either good or bad, that evil brings us. We should not listen to the thoughts that come from outside or answer them. We need to despise them completely and not converse with them. Thus we should seek in every way the complete muteness of our nous because only with this action can we keep our soul in calmness so that the Jesus Prayer can act effectively.

It is known that the thoughts are led from the mind into the heart and disturb it. The troubled mind also troubles the heart. Just as the wind raises the waves of the sea, so the wind of thoughts raises waves in the soul. Attentiveness is necessary for prayer. That is why the Fathers talk about prayer in combination with watchfulness. Watchfulness keeps the nous in constant alertness and readiness and prayer brings the divine grace...

The Holy Fathers teach that even if man is not always under the dominion of the demons he is, however, under their influence and persistent hostility. They continually turn around the soul and try, by all means, to make the faithful sin, either through the senses (when the object is near) or through the imagination (when the person or object is far away) or through the movements of the flesh. For the whole of man, who consists of soul and body, receives the influence of Satan and gets captured by him.

The hostile tactics of the evil, however, are more apparent during prayer. Those who fight in this inner struggle see evil making war against them furiously at every step. They see the devil clearly using all means to distract their nous from God. They see all the cunning devices of the evil demon, who hates the good and kills man.

According to St. Mark the Ascetic: "When the devil sees that the nous is praying in the heart, then he incurs great and malicious temptations". He hates men exceedingly, and his hatred increases when he sees that they tend to become angels through prayer, and occupy the place the demons had before their fall. St. Gregory of Nyssa describes this malicious envy of the devil, caused by the theosis of man: "The demons are consumed by envy and jealousy when men are ready to acquire kinship with God, whereas they (the demons) have fallen from their relationship with the good"...

Imagination is the most cunning weapon of Satan; imagining the past and imagining the future; imagining good works, imagining bad ones. Various thoughts come and preoccupy the nous, so that it ceases to meditate on the name of Jesus. He tries to make man not to show interest in God and express his love. Primarily he coaxes him to call to mind the various faults he has committed in his former and recent life.

The Holy Fathers say that the war is usually as fierce as the passions were before. For every pleasure he must pay the proportionate pain. There is a close connection between pleasure and pain in the ascetic life of the Fathers. Pleasure brought about both the Fall and pain; and it is precisely this pain which restores man to his original state and cures him. Thus, man suffers a lot. He pays for each thought and evil pleasure the proportionate amount of suffering, so that an equilibrium may be restored.

Events that happened many years ago which he felt pleasure for, being forgotten in the meantime, appear now in all their intensity and range. He may even reach the point of disgust and despair.

Blasphemous thoughts come upon the athlete of prayer...incredulity about the great matters of faith, like the divinity of Christ and the purity of the Most Holy Mother of God and the Saints, etc. Many times these thoughts are expressed and verbalized during prayer, without the wrestler of this struggle knowing it or wanting it...

Blasphemous thoughts must be opposed with contempt. Only in this way do they disappear. Blasphemous thoughts are inspired by the devil they are not ours. Here we can affirm that the Lord's word has validity: "You cannot serve God and mammon", (Matt. 6:24) that is, the nous cannot do two things simultaneously. It cannot be enchanted by the sweetest nectar of the Jesus prayer on the one hand and on the other hand, while it is praying, doubt the power of prayer or dogmatic truths. The latter is the attack of the devil. Contempt then is needed and if the blasphemous thought continually attacks us, it needs confession to the spiritual father. Then it disappears immediately. Moreover, the same happens with persistent thoughts. A thought that persists, especially during prayer, needs to be confessed. Thus the devil who hides under it immediately disappears, like the snake when we lift up the stone...

The athlete of prayer must not let himself be shaken. He must oppose imagination with the continuous invocation of the name of Jesus, and he must be concentrated within the words of the Jesus prayer. He must stand bravely in the conciseness of the Jesus prayer. He must not think of anything during prayer, either of wrong or even good works...

Many times the devil, he continued, appears and talks to the athlete of prayer. He challenges him and tries to open a dialogue with him. Sometimes he blames the athlete, sometimes he praises him, sometimes he scoffs at him, sometimes he interprets certain acts wrongly. The inexperienced in this spiritual contest start talking with the devil and answer his questions and his assaults. However, this is an error, especially for the beginners, because the inexperienced in these situations are defeated even if it seems that the devil was put to flight by their replies. Confusion and fear remain. And later, when they recall this scene and all that was said, they will be shaken and troubled. The Fathers recommend that those who do not have the experience and the necessary strength should not answer. They must be indifferent to the devil and despise him. They must do the same in the war against their thoughts. Thus contempt against the devil and perseverance in the Jesus prayer are needed...

This Transcript is at:

<http://www.orthodox.net/articles/prayer-is-a-painful-and-bloody-struggle-by-elder-ephraim-of-katounakia.doc>

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