



## Learning the Prayer of The Heart

In 1851, an anonymous monk on Mount Athos wrote a book on prayer. The title of the book has been translated as *The Watchful Mind: Teachings on the Prayer of the Heart*. It is a book that I cannot recommend for most people because, like much classic Orthodox spiritual writing (the *Philokalia*, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, *The Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian*, to name a few), it was written for people pursuing the spiritual life, a life in communion with God, in a very specific monastic setting, a setting that exists in very few places in the world today, or some might say—indeed have said—in a setting that does not exist at all in the world any more. And yet, these texts are nonetheless compelling for us because they bear witness to a relationship with God, an intensity of relationship with God, that many people in the world today long for.

The big danger in reading these books is twofold. The first is delusion: to think you have attained to the heights of which these holy writers speak. The second (and most common in my experience) is despondency as you realize that you cannot discipline yourself to attain even to what these writers describe as the preliminary conditions for noetic prayer. Both delusion and despondency are real possibilities for those who venture into these texts without care and guidance. Nonetheless, like treasure hunters, some of us are lured into these texts seeking nuggets of helpful guidance in prayer, nuggets that can be applied in the world, in the fallen culture and capitalist economic realities we find ourselves in. Even in the mud and mire, some of us still long to glimpse the flowers that only grow in alpine meadows.

And here is the good news: it is possible to find wise advice and nuggets of helpful insight in these books written for advanced strugglers in spiritual prayer, advice and insight that is not only helpful for those great athletes of prayer, but also for us in the beginner's class, those of us in the world, distracted by cares of family and of making a living. Even here in the world, we can begin to pray and experience some of the low-hanging fruits of prayer.

We must take care, however, to remember that we are barely beginners. If God grants us an experience in prayer that overwhelms us, it's only a token to encourage us on the way, not evidence of maturity. And, we must never forget that as beginners we can be easily deceived (like children enticed by candy from strangers), so we must not hide what we think God is showing us from our spiritual fathers and mothers. The evil one works in darkness. Revealing our thoughts to someone else, someone we respect, whose evaluation of our experiences we will respect, this is our main weapon against delusion. Similarly, as beginners, we must not despair when we see how far we are from the spiritual heights described in these holy books. Neither do we need to become despondent at our slothfulness or the intensity of the attack of our passions. We are beginners, babies in the spiritual struggle. And just as babies can suddenly fall into a temper tantrum and just as suddenly fall out, we too are just beginning to learn to recognize and battle against the passions.

In fact, it is here, in learning to resist the passions, that we can learn one of the fundamental lessons that leads to prayer of the heart. In Discourse 3 of *The Watchful Mind*, the unknown monk of Mount Athos tells the stories of two men and how the demons and passion—the very enemies of prayer—became the means by which they learned to pray.

In truth, when one of the fathers was asked about from where he learned noetic prayer, he said he



learned it from the demons. And when another father was asked about this same subject, he said that he learned it from beardless youths. These words might seem strange, but they are not. The first, by forcing his heart with the prayer in order to drive away approaching demons, advanced in the prayer so much that he discovered the perfect method of the prayer. So the demons were the cause of this discovery, and he rightly said that he learned the prayer from the demons. The other, seeing beardless youths, feared that his heart might become impure from some evil thought and a wicked consent of the heart, and so he forced his heart in the prayer so much that he too found the perfect method of the noetic prayer of the heart. For this reason, then, both of them answered correctly.

As it turns out, the very demons and passions that seek to drive a wedge between us and God, if we will fight against them with prayer in our hearts, can be the means of teaching us effective prayer. The demons that the writer is speaking of are fear-generating demons. In the text he talks about how demons will suggest fearsome thoughts to us about what could or might happen if we proceed in our righteous intention. These thoughts quickly stimulate our bodily responses so that we begin to sweat or shake or feel our hearts beating quickly. It is specifically these fear-generating demons that the writer is speaking of when he says that demons can teach us to pray. When our minds are attacked by a flood of fearsome thoughts, we can, as the monk did, begin to force our hearts to say the prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” We can repeat this prayer with every breath, forcing our hearts and minds to pay attention to nothing but this prayer. If we will do this, then we will discover that even the demons, manifested to us in thoughts creating in us crippling fear, even these demons can be the fuel that generates the beginnings of pure prayer in our hearts.

And then there is the example of the temptation of beardless youths. Although this is a specific reference to homosexual passion, any driving passion can produce the same effect in anyone who wants to respond to the passion with prayer. When I was a young university student striving to be holy as best as I understood it in those days, I used to hate the month of May because the warmer weather was the signal to all of the young women to take off most of their clothes. I didn’t know about the Jesus prayer in those days, so I used to walk down the halls of my university staring at the ceiling trying to avoid seeing women’s bodies and the passionate thoughts and feelings that would be aroused in me. I can tell you from experience, that the Jesus prayer works much better than walking down the hallway staring at the ceiling (and you also bump into fewer people and things).

It doesn’t matter what kind of passion drives you crazy: envy, anger, lust, greed, selfishness—even depression or despair. All of the passions can teach us to pray if we really want to be free from the passion and we really want to pray. A metaphor I ran across once that really captures one of the ways that I have learned to use the Jesus prayer is that of using the Jesus Prayer as a stick to beat away unwanted thoughts, to beat away the demons. When I find myself under attack, when unwanted thoughts bombard me or when sinful images invade my mind and I cannot get rid of them easily, then the only weapon I seem to have is the Jesus prayer said forcefully in my heart and even loudly with my mouth. When I’m not in a private place, I will sometimes take a walk or even drive my car so that I can pray forcefully and out loud, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!”

I know from what I have read and from what I have heard from a few holy people I have met over the years that there are heights of prayer and nearness to God that are way beyond anything I am likely to ever



experience, largely because I am not a monastic and because I am not a very diligent person. Nonetheless, there are crumbs that fall from the table of very holy men and women, nuggets of spiritual insight and techniques and experiences of prayer that even we in the world can eat up and profit from. Using the Jesus Prayer as a stick to beat away the unwanted thoughts of demons and the passions that can overpower us is one of these crumbs from the table. And if we will do it—not just think about it, but do it—if we will pray when we are attacked by fears or passions, then we will discover that this little crumb of insight may be all we need to begin to overcome the passions and to grow in virtue and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. It may just be for us the beginning of the Prayer of the Heart.