

St. Silouan of Mount Athos and Orthodox Spiritual Life

St. Silouan: "I began to beseech God for forgiveness, and He granted me not only forgiveness but also the Holy Spirit, and in the Holy Spirit, I knew God. ... the Lord remembered not my sins, and gave me to love people, and my soul longs for the whole world to be saved and dwell in the Kingdom of Heaven, and see the glory of the Lord, and delight in the love of God."

Elder Sophrony: "Young, strong, handsome, and by this time prosperous, too, Simeon [St. Silouan's name 'in the world'] revelled in life. He was popular in the village, being good-natured, peaceable and jolly, and the village girls looked on him as a man they would like to marry. He himself was attracted to one of them and, before the question of marriage had been put, what so often happens befell late one summer evening."

St. Silouan: "At first I thought of giving in to the fellow but then I was ashamed of how the girls would laugh at me, so I hit him a hard blow in the chest. His body shot away and he fell backwards with a heavy thud in the middle of the road. Froth and blood trickled from his mouth. The onlookers were all horrified. So was I. 'I've killed him,' I thought ... It was over half an hour before he was able to rise to his feet, and with difficulty they got him home, where he was bad for a couple of months, but luckily he didn't die."

St. Philotheos of Mount Sinai: "It is by means of thoughts that the spirits of evil wage a secret war against the soul. For since the soul is invisible, these malicious powers naturally attack it invisibly."

St. Silouan: "The enemy uses intrusive thoughts to deceive us."

The Apostle Paul: "We wrestle ... against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual ... wickedness in high places."

Elder Sophrony: "This spirit of 'wickedness in high places' rushes to attack the contrite heart and mind now stayed on God. Brazenly it invades us, creating the impression that the thoughts and feelings brought by the enemy are our own. Indeed, after the Fall there is something in us that does respond to demonic suggestions."

St. Silouan: "The soul's war with the enemy continues until death."
"Our battle rages every day, every hour."

St. John Cassian: "It is impossible for the mind not to be troubled by these thoughts. But if we exert ourselves it is within our power either to accept them and give them our attention or to expel them. Their coming is not within our power to control, but their expulsion is."

St. Silouan: "Just as people go in and out of a house, so may thoughts proceeding from devils come and go again, if you do not accept them."

St. Silouan: “Train yourself to cut off an intrusive thought immediately ...Be at pains over this, so that you acquire the habit. The soul is a creature of habit: according to the habit you have acquired, so will you act all the rest of your life.”

The Apostle Paul: “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth ...”

St. John Climacus: “Flog your enemies with the name of Jesus, since there is no stronger weapon in heaven or on earth.”

St. Hesychios the Priest: “Whenever we are filled with evil thoughts, we should throw the invocation of our Lord Jesus Christ into their midst. Then, as experience has taught us, we shall see them instantly dispersed, like smoke in the air.”

Elder Sophrony: “When the attention of the mind is fixed in the heart it is possible to control what happens in the heart, and the battle against the passions assumes a rational character. The enemy is recognized and can be driven off by the power of the Name of Christ.”

St. Silouan: “Should an intrusive thought approach, there is no cause to be troubled. Put your trust in God and continue in prayer. We must not be troubled, because that rejoices the enemy. Pray, and the intrusive thought will leave you.”

St. Silouan: “The conceited man ... wants to have visions, and deems himself worthy of them, and so it is easy for the enemy to delude him.”

St. Silouan: “To all who may find themselves in the [same] misfortune which overtook me, I now write: Stand fast; hope firmly in God, and the enemy will not keep ground. By the grace of God I know that the Lord mercifully cares for us, and not one prayer ... is lost with God.”

St. Silouan: “I want only one thing: to pray for all men as I pray for myself.”

The Practice of Prayer

Elder Zechariah of Essex, England: “Prayer is a matter of love. Man expresses love through prayer, and if we pray, it is an indication that we love God. If we do not pray, this indicates that we do not love God, for the measure of our prayer is the measure of our love for God.”

St. John Climacus: “War reveals the love of a soldier for his king, and the time and practice of prayer show ... a monk’s love for God. So your prayer shows where you stand.”

St. Mark the Ascetic: “There is nothing higher than love for God;” “Undistracted prayer is a sign of love for God; but careless or distracted prayer is a sign of love for pleasure.”

St. John Climacus: “Prayer is by nature a dialogue and a union of man with God.”

Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos: “Prayer is not an abstract state but personal communion with God.”

Elder Aimilianos of Simonos Petras Monastery on Mount Athos: “Prayer ... is a turning towards a person. And thus for prayer to exist, this person must also exist. And for me to say ‘I pray’ means that the active presence of that person is a reality for me. I must be able to realize a certain degree of intimacy with that person’s presence and existence.”

Elder Aimilianos: “Thus worship and Holy Communion are inseparably united. And what is it that they do for me? They make God present and alive for me. After that, what then remains to be done? For me to talk to Him, to address myself to Him Who comes to me. And so God, through worship, stretches out towards me, and I, through prayer, stretch out towards Him.”

Evagrius writes: “If you wish to pray, you have need of God ‘who gives prayer to him who prays.”

St. John Climacus: “Always be brave, and God will teach you your prayer. ... You cannot discover from the teaching of others the beauty of prayer. Prayer has its own special teacher in God. ... He grants the prayer of him who prays.”

Elder Porphyrios: “Prayer of the heart is prayed only by a person who has attracted the grace of God. I mustn’t be done with the thought, ‘I’ll learn it, I’ll do it, I’ll acquire it,’ because in this way we may be led to egotism and pride.”

St. John Climacus: “The attitude for prayer is the same for all, but there are many kinds of prayer and many different types of prayers. ... But heartfelt thanksgiving should have first place ... Next should be confession and genuine contrition of soul. After that should come our requests to the universal King. This method of prayer is best, as one of the brothers was told by an angel of the Lord.”

Elder Porphyrios: “What did I tell you about the nightingale? It sings without anyone seeing. Be like that—selfless. Give yourself over to the worship of God in secret.”

Elder Porphyrios: “Whether you pray with brethren or alone, try to pray not simply as a routine, but with conscious awareness of your prayer.”

Elder Porphyrios: “Pray without forming images in your mind. Don’t try to imagine Christ. The Fathers emphasized the need for prayer to be free of images. With an image, the focus of prayer is easily lost, because one image can easily be displaced by another. And the evil one may intrude images and we lost the grace.”

Elder Porphyrios: “Nor should you employ diverse techniques. You don’t need to sit on a low stool, nor do you need to bow down your head, nor to close your eyes. Many say, ‘Sit on a low stool, hunch yourself up, gather yourself up tightly and concentrate.’ But on what? Try and see. It’s not necessary to concentrate particularly to say the prayer. And you don’t need any effort when you’re filled with divine love.”

Elder Porphyrios: “First of all, you must shun all self-interest. Prayer must be entirely selfless. Everything must happen mystically and without self-interest. That is, don’t think that if you concentrate with your mind then grace will come into your heart also and you will experience that leap of joy. Don’t pray with that motive, but with simplicity and humility. Aspire always to the glory of God.

Elder Porphyrios: “In prayer what is important is not the duration but the intensity. Pray albeit for five minutes, but abandoning yourself to God with love and longing. One person may pray all night long and another person only for five minutes and yet the five-minute prayer may be superior. This is a mysterious matter ...”

Elder Porphyrios: “Before we pray the soul must prepare itself with prayer. Pray for prayer.”

Elder Porphyrios: “Preparation is also to ... occupy yourself with singing hymns, the triumphant hymns of the saints and martyrs and the Psalms of David. Study Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers. In this way your soul will be softened, sanctified and assimilated to God. It will be ready to hear the disclosures of God.”

John Climacus: “In your prayers there is no need for high-flown words, for it is the simple and unsophisticated babblings of children that have more often won the heart of the Father in heaven.”

John Climacus: “Do not be forward in your dealings with God. Approach Him rather in all humility, and you will be given still more boldness.”

John Climacus: “Pray in all simplicity. The publican and the prodigal son were reconciled to God by a single utterance.”

Elder Porphyrios: “In our prayer we should ask only for the salvation of our soul. ... The secret is not to think about asking for the specific thing at all. The secret is to ask for your

union with Christ with utter selflessness, without saying 'give me this' or 'give me that'. It suffices to say, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' God has no need to be informed by us about our various needs."

Elder Porphyrios: "Force ... is not the way to acquire prayer. ... Pray ... without ulterior motives, not in order to gain anything. ... Make prostrations out of love ... There is no point in making a hundred prostrations if they leave you unmoved. Make only twenty or fifteen, but with fervor and love for the Lord ... gently, without forcing ourselves, we enter into prayer."

Elder Porphyrios: "As the most effective prayer the Church Fathers use the short phrase, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' This prayer is the key to the spiritual life. It is a prayer that cannot be taught either by books, or by spiritual fathers or by anyone else. Its sole teacher is divine grace. ... Only the Holy Spirit, only the grace of God, can inspire the Jesus Prayer. It's not difficult to repeat the words, but you cannot pray it properly because your old fallen self rebuffs it. Unless you enter into the atmosphere of grace, you will not be able to say the prayer. ... Only through divine grace can you pray. No prayer can occur without divine grace. ... And the Lord alone gives grace for this end."

Elder Porphyrios: "You can say the prayer, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,' gently, without straining and without contortion wherever you happen to be – on stool, on a chair, in a car, walking along the road, at school, in the office or at work. Don't tie yourself down to a specific place. What is all-important is love for Christ. If your soul repeats with worship and adoration the seven words, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,' it never can have enough. They are insatiable words! Repeat them all your life!"

Elder Porphyrios: "Sometimes it is good to say the prayer, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,' out loud so that you hear it with your ears. We are body and soul and there is interaction between the two."

Elder Porphyrios: "Prayer should be interior, prayed with the mind and not with the lips, so as not to cause distraction with the mind wandering here and there. Let us bring Christ into our mind in an unforced manner by repeating very gently, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' Don't think anything except the words, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' Nothing else. Nothing at all."

Elder Porphyrios: "Calmly, with open eyes, so that you are not in danger of succumbing to fantasies and delusions, and with care and devotion, turn towards Christ."

Elder Porphyrios: "Pray to God with love and yearning in tranquility, with meekness, gently and without forcing yourself. And when you repeat the prayer, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me' say it slowly, humbly, gently and with divine love. Pronounce the name of Christ with sweetness. Say the words one at a time: 'Lord... Jesus... Christ... have mercy on me,' smoothly, tenderly, affectionately, silently, secretly, mystically, but with exaltation with longing, with passion, without tension, force or unbecoming emphasis, without compulsion and pressure."

St John Climacus: “A silent man is a son of wisdom and is always gaining great knowledge.”
“The lover of silence draws close to God. He talks to Him in secret and God enlightens him.”

“Silence is the mother of prayer.”

St John Climacus: “Try not to talk excessively in your prayer, in case your mind is distracted by the search for words. ... Talkative prayer frequently distracts the mind and deludes it, whereas brevity makes for concentration.”

St Diadochos of Photiki: “When the door of the steam baths is continually left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it; likewise the soul, in its desire to say many things, dissipates its remembrance of God through the door of speech, even though everything it says may be good. ... Timely silence, then, is precious, for it is nothing less than the mother of the wisest thoughts.”

Elder Porphyrios: “When you have fallen in love with Christ you prefer silence and spiritual prayer. Then words cease. It is inner silence that precedes, accompanies and follows the divine visitation, the divine union and co-mingling of the soul with the divine. When you find yourself in this state, words are not needed. This is something you experience, something that cannot be explained. Only the person who experiences this state understands it. ... The most perfect form of prayer is silent prayer. ... Amid the mystery of silence the assimilation to God takes place. It is here too that truest worship takes place. ... This manner of silence is the most perfect. This is how you are assimilated to God. You enter into the mysteries of God. We must not speak much, but leave grace to speak.”

St. Isaac the Syrian: “Do you want to perform the recitation of the psalms ... with delight, and take in the spiritual words that you are reciting? ... Say the words of the psalm as though it were a prayer. ... Those passages which are prayers, pray them as though they were your own ... You should say the psalms with real supplication, as if they were your very own words.”

St. John Cassian: “Seized by the identical feelings in which the psalm was composed or sung, we become, as it were, its author. We anticipate its idea instead of following it ...”

Elder Sophrony: “Prayer is infinite creation, far superior to any form of art or science.”

St. Silouan of Mount Athos: “By the grace of God I know that the Lord mercifully cares for us, and not one prayer ... is lost with God.”