

SERMON on the 4th Sunday of Lent - St. John Climacus. On Prayer

The Holy and Great Elder and Spiritual Father, St. John of the Ladder, gives us some instructions concerning prayer. First of all, we are told that when we are going to stand at prayer, we must be oblivious to all wrongs. In other words, if any one has offended us in any way, we must put these remembrances out of our minds and hearts. "Otherwise, prayer will bring you no benefit," writes St. John. Next, we are told that our prayer should be completely simple. The Blessed Elder St. Porphyrios advised his spiritual children to say short prayers. The Jesus Prayer, for example, is very short and simple. "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." It is the prayer that we repeatedly say while using the prayer rope. It is the prayer that we say when we would follow St. Paul's admonishment to "pray without ceasing." It is the prayer of the publican who had such humility that he could not even raise his eyes to heaven, who beat his breast with sincere remorse and acknowledgment of his sins, and merely said "Lord, have mercy on me!" It is the prayer of the thief who hung on a cross next to the Lord, and uttered a few simple words of remorse and penitence, and it was enough to blot out a lifetime of sin and grant him inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven. Likewise, when the prodigal son returned to the father, he uttered a few short words, saying that he was sorry and asking for forgiveness, and was restored completely to his former status. The Jesus Prayer, sometimes just called "the prayer," is so powerful, that it burns and drives away the demons. The constant movement of the prayer rope is like the cartridge in a machine gun, rapidly firing ammunition that kills and devastates our spiritual enemies in the spiritual warfare. Next, St. John instructs us that the first thing we should express in our prayer is thanksgiving. Let us offer unto the Lord our gratitude. Think about all the blessings that God has given us and that we more often than not take for granted. Be grateful, obliterate all thoughts of entitlement and so-called "rights," acknowledge and think about all the gifts we enjoy, and offer heartfelt thanks to the Lord, realizing that we are unworthy and undeserving of all His gracious benevolence and kindness. St. John instructs us that the next thing we should offer in prayer is confession and heartfelt contrition of soul. We can't confess our sins if we don't know what they are. We prepare for this part of our daily prayer by examining our conscience. We do this by studying God's commandments and listing every one that we have failed to keep. Unabashedly and without any justification, we should judge our every word, deed and thought and how we failed to live the life in Christ. There are many Scriptural readings and guides to help us in this task, such as the Sermon on the Mount. We should verbalize and say our sins out loud to the Lord and with sorrow and a contrite heart humbly ask the Lord to forgive us. Our demeanor should be one of obedience. We should completely strip away from ourselves any self-will, and our only heartfelt desire and prayer should be to do the will of God. Our struggle is that our self-will should fade away and be replaced with God's will. "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven" is how the Lord teaches us to pray. And if we have any special requests that we would like to offer unto the Lord; for example, if someone has asked us to pray for them, then and *only* then after all of these other prerequisites have been met, can we now with humility, fear and trepidation dare to offer our petitions to the Lord. Don't we say at every Divine Liturgy before the Lord's Prayer, "And make us worthy, O Master, with boldness and without condemnation, to dare to call upon Thee, the Heavenly God, as father and to say..."?

To recap, when we are going to stand at prayer this is what we need to do:

1. Put away all remembrance of wrongs.
2. Let our prayer be simple, not verbose or over-sophisticated.
3. Be thankful and have gratitude.
4. Confess and repent for our sins.
5. Offer our petitions to the Lord, and pray for others.

The Blessed Elder St. Porphyrios recommends that if we add to this some prostrations and read a little from Holy Scripture, then we will be, as our Holy Father St. John Climacus says, “on the road to uniting ourselves with love; and love is God, to Whom be glory unto the ages. Amen.”