

ALL CHRISTIANS MUST PRAY CEASELESSLY

—by St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite—

My beloved Christians, let no one think that only members of the clergy and monastics are obligated to pray ceaselessly at all times, whereas laypeople are exempt from this. No! Not at all! All Christians in general have the obligation to constantly be in a state of prayer. The most-holy patriarch of Constantinople Philotheos writes the following in regard to this matter, in his biography of St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki:

The divine St. Gregory was close friends with a guileless and virtuous monk named Job. Once, while conversing with him, he referred to the fact that every Christian in general must make a sustained effort to pray ceaselessly, citing the Apostle Paul who commands all Christians: **“Pray ceaselessly” (1 Thes. 5:17)**; the prophet David who—despite the fact that he was a king and had to attend to all the matters of his kingdom—states: **“I beheld the Lord ever before me”** [through prayer] **(Ps. 15:8)**; and St. Gregory the Theologian who similarly advises all Christians that it is necessary to commemorate the name of God through prayer more frequently than we breathe. When St. Gregory had finished making all the above (and many more similar) points to his friend Job, he further explained to him that not only must they [as monks] pray ceaselessly, but, in obedience to the counsels of the holy fathers, they should also instruct and encourage everyone else—both monks and laity, both the wise and the uneducated, men, women, and children alike—to pray ceaselessly. Upon hearing these things, monk Job deemed them unconventional, and he began to disagree with the Saint, maintaining that ceaseless prayer is something that applies only to hermits and monastics who have withdrawn themselves from the world and who are free of obligations; whereas, it is unattainable for laypeople who have to deal with so many matters and responsibilities. St. Gregory proceeded to set forth additional testimony and irrefutable proof; monk Job, however, remained unconvinced. And so, the divine Gregory desiring to avoid a long, drawn-out debate decided not to say anything further, and thus each one of them returned to their cell. Later that evening when Job was praying in his room privately, the Lord, Who desires all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), sent an angel to him. Having appeared to him, this angel of God first reproached him sternly for arguing and disagreeing with St. Gregory, and for refuting things that are obvious, which clearly give rise to the salvation of Christians. Then, he ordered Job on behalf of our Holy God to be careful henceforth, to no longer say anything

against this most beneficial work of the soul, because in this manner he would be opposing the will of God. He further told him that he should neither dare to accept any contrary thoughts, nor to think and believe anything differently than St. Gregory Palamas. In following, the simple monk Job immediately went to St. Gregory. After falling to his feet and begging for forgiveness for his obstinacy and quarreling, he then proceeded to reveal to him all that the Angel of the Lord had told him.

Do you see dear reader how all Christians, from young to old, must always pray using the noetic prayer “**Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me**”? And how it is necessary for our mind and heart to grow accustomed to saying this prayer ceaselessly? Consider how pleasing this prayer is to God and how much benefit issues from it! It is so pleasing to Him and beneficial for us that our merciful Lord decided to send a heavenly angel to reveal this truth to us, so that we may no longer have any doubts about it. St. Gregory Palamas’ father, whose name was Constantine, dwelled within the royal palace and was referred to as both the father and teacher of Emperor Andronikos. Despite the fact that daily he was involved with governmental issues, not to mention the matters he had to deal with in his own home, (because he was extremely wealthy and possessed many properties and servants, in addition to having a wife and children), this marvelous man remained so inseparable from God and so preoccupied with ceaseless noetic prayer, that most of the time he would forget what exactly he was discussing with the emperor and the rulers of the palace concerning matters of the kingdom. As a result, he would have to ask again once or twice to be reminded of the topic of discussion. On account of this, often times the other governors present, unaware of the cause of his absentmindedness, would become annoyed and ridicule him for not following the conversation and for interrupting the emperor asking him a second time. However, the emperor who was aware of the reason would defend him saying, “Blessed Constantine is engrossed in his own matters, which prevent him from concentrating on the temporary and vain issues we are discussing. The mind of this blessed soul is focused on the true and heavenly topics, and this is why he easily neglects the earthly ones. His complete attention is on prayer and God.” This is why Constantine was highly esteemed and loved by the emperor, the noblemen, and in general by all the governors of the kingdom—just as he was loved by God—and this is why this righteous person of blessed memory even became worthy of performing miracles.

One time while sailing by boat with his family to the region of Galata in order to visit and receive the blessing of a certain hermit who dwelled in that particular area, he asked his servants if they had brought any food with them to offer the elder, with which, in turn, he could also offer them hospitality. They

responded that they had neglected to take anything with them because they were in a rush to leave. Blessed Constantine was saddened when he heard this; however, he did not say anything further to them. Instead, he walked toward the front of the vessel, lowered his hand into the sea, and began to pray silently with noetic prayer, entreating the God and Lord of the ocean to send him something to serve as a meal. After a short while—wondrous are Thy works, O Christ, through which you glorify Thy servants!—he lifted his hand out of the water holding an exceptionally large fish. Having tossed it onto the deck, he said the following to his servants, “Look! The Lord was concerned for the elder, His faithful servant, and He sent him something to eat.”

Do you see, my brothers, how Jesus Christ glorifies His servants who always remain with Him through prayer, and who constantly call upon His most-holy and sweet name? Furthermore, the righteous and saintly Evdokimos who lived in Constantinople spent his days within the royal palace, handling various issues. He interacted with the emperor and the rulers of the palace daily, and he had to deal with many responsibilities and distractions. Despite all this, he held on to noetic prayer like an inseparable companion, as Symeon the Translator relates in his biography. Living within the world and surrounded by worldly distractions, this blessed man truly lived an angelic and supernatural life, and he was thus granted by God to have a blessed and divine end to his life.¹ There are countless other people as well who lived in society and yet were entirely devoted to this noetic and life-saving prayer, as mentioned in various historical accounts.

Therefore my fellow Christians, I, along with the divine Saint John Chrysostom, make the following appeal to you, for the salvation of your souls: Do not be indifferent to this work of prayer. Emulate the people whom we have mentioned, and follow their example as much as possible. This may seem difficult in the beginning; but be certain and assured, from the almighty God Himself, that the very name of our Lord Jesus Christ (when it is invoked daily and ceaselessly by us) will make all the difficulties easy. As time goes on, once we grow accustomed to this prayer and we taste its sweetness, we will come to know through personal experience that it is neither impossible nor difficult; on the contrary, will see that it is both possible and easy. This is why the divine Saint Paul, who knew better than us the great benefit of prayer, commands us to pray ceaselessly (**1 Th. 5:17**). He certainly would never have advised us to do this if it was difficult or impossible. In such an instance, we would not be able to carry out this directive, and, consequently, we would necessarily disobey, transgress his commandment, and be worthy of condemnation.

¹ St. Evdokimos is commemorated on July 31st.

However, when he advised us to pray ceaselessly, his intent was for us to pray with our mind—something that we are always able to do. For when we are working or walking or sitting or eating or drinking, we can continuously pray and carry out noetic prayer with our mind—which is truly pleasing to God. We can work with our body and pray with our mind. Our external being can serve and perform all types of physical labor, while our internal person can be completely devoted to the worship of God, without ceasing from this spiritual work of noetic prayer. This is what the God-man Jesus Christ also commands us in His Holy Gospel: **“When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray in secret to your Father” (Mt. 6:6)**. Our body serves as the room of the soul, and our five senses are the windows. The soul enters into its room when the mind ceases wandering about aimlessly preoccupied with the things of the world, and it remains within our heart. Likewise, our senses are closed and remain shut when we do not permit them to become fixated on the material and visible things of this world. In this manner, our mind remains free of every sinful and worldly preoccupation, and through hidden and noetic prayer we are united with our God and Father. Then, says the Lord, **“Your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Mt. 6:6)**.

God, Who knows all things, sees the noetic prayer you offer to Him in secret, and He will reward you with noticeable and remarkable gifts; for this is the true and perfect prayer that fills the soul with divine grace and spiritual awards. The longer a fragrant myrrh remains sealed within a container, the more fragrant the container becomes. It is similar with prayer. The longer and more often you confine the prayer of Jesus within your heart, the more it will fill you with divine grace. Blessed and fortunate are they who become accustomed to this heavenly work because with this prayer they will overcome every temptation of the evil demons, just as David vanquished haughty Goliath (**1 Kg. 17:51**). With this prayer they are able to extinguish the unruly desires of the flesh, just as the three youths extinguished the flames of the furnace (**Dan. 25:26**). With this work of noetic prayer they pacify the passions, just as Daniel tamed the wild lions (**Dan. 6:18**). With this prayer they bring the dew of the Holy Spirit into their hearts, just as the prophet Elijah brought rain down upon the Carmile mountain (**3 Kg. 18:45**). This noetic prayer is what ascends to the very throne of God, and it is stored within golden vessels so that it may be offered as incense to the Lord, as Saint John the Theologian states in the book of Revelation: **“And the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (Rev. 5:8)**. This noetic prayer is a light that perpetually illuminates man’s soul and sets ablaze man’s heart with the flames of God’s love. It is a chain that keeps man securely united with God.

O, what unsurpassable grace noetic prayer contains! This prayer allows man to always converse with God. What a truly extraordinary and exceptional privilege! Someone may be amongst other people in body and simultaneously with God in spirit! The angels do not have a physical voice; rather, they offer unceasing praise and doxology to God with their minds. Therefore, dear reader, when you enter into your room and shut the door (that is, when your mind does not roam around freely but enters and remains within your heart), and when your senses are securely locked (so they are not focused on the material things of this present world), and when you persistently pray with your mind in this manner, you then become similar to the holy angels, and your Father Who sees your hidden prayer, which you offer to Him secretly within your heart, will repay you with magnificent spiritual gifts in the open.

But, what greater honor is there or what more can one ask for than to always be, as we have already mentioned, next to God noetically and to speak with Him ceaselessly? Without Him no person can be blessed and fortunate, neither in this life nor in the next life to come.