

# Watchfulness and Prayer

by Hieromonk Damascene

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*The healing of our sick nous begins with watchfulness and prayer, which helps us to cut off sinful thoughts and to turn and keep turning to Christ our Savior at all times.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 19:14, Psalm 51:10, Matthew 26:41, Romans 12:2, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Hebrews 4:16, James 4:7

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "Prayer Life"

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## Description

Hieromonk Damascene emphasizes the importance of cutting off sinful thoughts, practicing watchfulness, and utilizing the Jesus Prayer to heal our nous and draw closer to God. He highlights the need to reject sinful thoughts immediately to avoid separation from God and the darkening of our nous. By continuously turning to Christ through prayer, we open ourselves to receive the transforming Grace of the Holy Spirit, leading to the illumination of our darkened nous. Establishing a consistent prayer rule, both throughout the day and at dedicated times, is essential for spiritual growth and resisting worldly distractions, allowing us to deepen our connection with God and prepare to receive the Sacraments.

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## Transcript

The healing of our sick nous begins with what we have just been discussing: the sacrifice of our "old man," the cutting off of the passions, repentance. In speaking of the healing of the nous, the Holy Fathers place much emphasis on the practice of watchfulness. We must at all times watch over our thoughts so as to reject--to cut off--sinful and impassioned thoughts. When a sinful thought comes to us and we cut it off at once, it is not a sin. But when we entertain a sinful thought, when we cherish it and develop it because we are attracted to it, then it becomes sin, then it separates us from God. When we entertain impassioned thoughts, our nous becomes darkened, deprived of the Light of Divine Grace. These thoughts lead to impassioned feelings, and the feelings fuel more thoughts. Soon we are caught in a passion, and the passion becomes habitual. That is why we must cut off the sickness where it starts, in our thoughts.

To cut off sinful thoughts, we first must recognize such thoughts as our enemy. We must realize that they can separate us from God. For example, when we have a resentful or judgmental thought against our neighbor, we must recognize that entertaining this thought will put us at enmity with God. So we refuse to entertain it. We just let it go. And if it comes back again an hour later, or even (as often happens) a few minutes later, we again cut it off.

In the Orthodox Church, we have a special means of cutting off thoughts: the Jesus Prayer. The effects of this Prayer are twofold. In the first place the Prayer helps us to cut off and turn away from impassioned thoughts. And in the second place the Prayer helps us to turn and keep turning to Christ our Savior at all times.

When we practice watchfulness with the help of the Jesus Prayer, we make our soul open to receive the Grace of the Holy Spirit, which transforms us and deifies us. We are no longer repelling Grace, but attracting it. We are calling upon Christ to have mercy on our darkened souls, to dwell within us more fully, to fill us with His unending Life, with the Light of the Holy Spirit Whom He has sent from the Father (cf. John 15:26). Thus our darkened nous is illumined by the Light of the Uncreated Grace of God. "Only the Holy Spirit can purify the nous," writes St. Diadochos of Photiki in *The Philokalia*. "In every way, therefore, and especially through peace of soul, we must make ourselves a dwelling-place for the Holy Spirit. Then we shall have the lamp of spiritual knowledge burning always within us." [13]

In addition to saying the Jesus Prayer, we should cultivate the habit of calling out to God in our own words. This should be done throughout the day. The Fathers counsel us against trying to make long, eloquent speeches to God; rather, we should pray simply, from the heart. We can call out to Him either verbally or mentally, depending on the situation. Of course, we should call out to Him when temptations assail us, but we should by no means wait for such moments before we speak to Him. Archimandrite Sophrony, the disciple of St. Silouan of Mount Athos, had the practice of praying to God each time he was about to see and speak to someone. He prayed that God would bless the encounter that was about to take place, so that God's Grace would be upon it. If we were to follow this very simple practice, just think how our daily encounters with people would be transformed, and how our lives would be different.

Also, together with praying throughout the day as we go about our daily tasks, it is important to devote certain times of the day to prayer, that is, to a rule of prayer. The content of this prayer rule varies with each person, and sometimes it changes. It is good to have the blessing of one's priest or spiritual father on one's prayer rule. The rule may consist of prayers from the Orthodox Prayer Book, or the Jesus Prayer, or a combination thereof, together with prayer in one's own words and the reading of the daily Gospel and Epistle verses. St. Theophan the Recluse notes that, while we are reading prayers from a prayer book or saying the Jesus Prayer, there may come times when we are moved to just stand silently before God with heartfelt yearning. He recommends that we stop reading or reciting prayers at such times, and then resume a little later. [14] "It is better to perform a small number of prayers properly than to hurry through a large number of prayers," he writes. "After you have recited each prayer, make prostrations, as many as you like, accompanied by a prayer for any necessity you feel, or by a usual short prayer.' You may limit the entire prayer rule just to prostrations with short prayers and prayer in your own words. Stand and make prostrations, saying, 'Lord have mercy,' or some other prayer, expressing your need or giving praise and thanks to God. You should establish either a number of prayers, or a length of time for prayer, so that you do not become lazy.' You should pray a little longer on your own especially at the end of your prayers, asking forgiveness for unintentional straying of the mind, and placing yourself in God's hands for the entire day." [15]

Setting aside time for daily prayer is an indispensable part of spiritual life. In families there should be daily common prayer before the family icon corner. Even if only a little time is set aside for this, it can make a huge difference in the life of a family. But in order for it to make a difference, it should be regular, not sporadic.

The key to prayer rules is constancy. If we skip our prayer rule, our Scripture readings and our spiritual readings for one day, we will find that already the world will start to invade us: the world of the passions, the world of distractions. If we skip our prayers for two days, we will be invaded even more, and so on. As time goes on, we will have less of the mind of Christ and more of the mind of the world. We will find ourselves more and more "conformed to this world." [16]

In order to grow in the Orthodox spiritual life and bear fruit, we need to put down roots, as in Christ's parable of the sower. And in order to put down roots, we need to have constancy, consistency, in our daily prayer and spiritual reading. In this practice, too, we can "renew ourselves from day to day," as St. John Chrysostom puts it.

The daily, continual practice of watchfulness and prayer, of course, cannot take the place of the Sacraments of the Church. But this practice can prepare us for receiving the Sacraments, and can deepen our experience of them. St. Symeon the New Theologian says that receiving Holy Communion is in itself a kind of deification--because we are receiving the deified Body and Blood of our Savior. Our practice of watchfulness and prayer, together with our repentance, can help us to partake of that deification more fully.

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