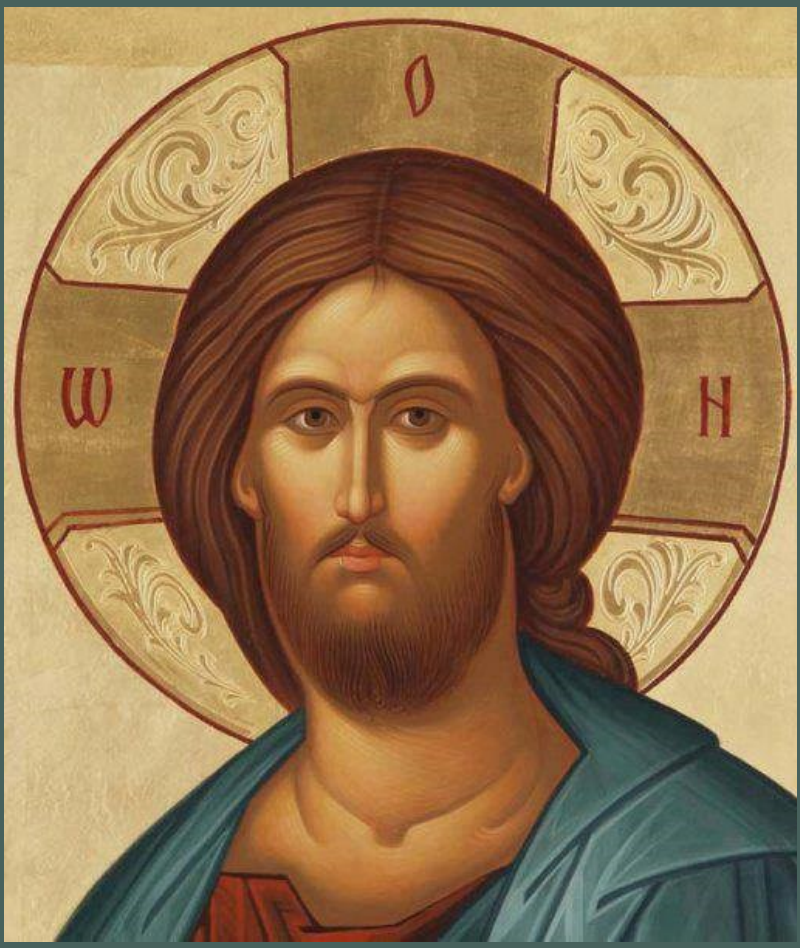
The Jesus Prayer



by Father Steven Tsichlis

The Jesus Prayer

Prayer is the basis of our Christian life, the source of our experience of Jesus as the Risen Lord. Yet how few Christians know how to pray with any depth! For most of us, prayer means little more than standing in the pews for an hour or so on Sunday morning or perhaps reciting, in a mechanical fashion, prayers once learned by rote during childhood. Our prayer life - and thus our life as Christians - remains, for the most part, at this superficial level.

THE CHALLENGE OF ST. PAUL

But this approach to the life of prayer has nothing to do with the Christianity of St. Paul, who urges the Christians of first century Thessalonica to "pray without ceasing" *(1 Thessalonians 5:1)*. And in his letter to Rome, the Apostle instructs the Christian community there to "be constant in prayer" *(Romans 12:12)*. He not only demands unceasing prayer of the Christians in his care, but practices it himself. "We constantly thank God for you" *(1 Thessalonians 2:13)* he writes in his letter to the Thessalonian community; and he comforts Timothy, his "true child in the faith" *(1Timothy 1:2)* with the words: "Always I remember you in my prayers" *(2 Timothy 1:3)*. In fact, whenever St. Paul speaks of prayer in his letters, two Greek words repeatedly appear: *PANTOTE*, which means always; and *ADIALEPTOS*, meaning without interruption or unceasingly. Prayer is then not merely a part of life which we can conveniently lay aside if something we deem more important comes up; prayer is all of life. Prayer is as essential to our life as breathing.

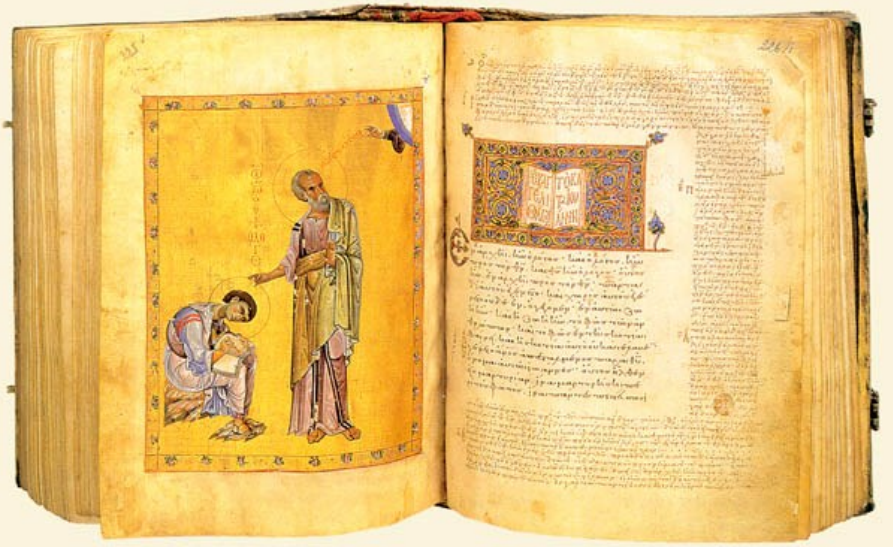
This raises some important questions. How can we be expected to pray all the time? We are, after all, very busy people. Our work, our spouse, our children, our school - all place heavy demands upon our time. How can we fit more time for prayer into our already overcrowded lives? These questions and the many others like them which could be asked set up a false dichotomy in our lives as Christians. To pray does not mean to think about God in contrast to thinking about other things or to spend time with God in contrast to spending time with our family and friends. Rather, to pray means to think and live our entire life in the Presence of God. As Paul Evdokimov - a well known Russian Orthodox theologian of the last century - has remarked: "Our whole life, every act and gesture, even a smile must become a hymn or adoration, an offering, a prayer. We must become prayer - prayer incarnate." This is what St. Paul means when he writes to the Corinthians that "whatever you do, do it for the glory of God" *(1 Corinthians 10:31)*.

THE JESUS PRAYER

In order to enter more deeply into the life of prayer and to come to grips with St. Paul's challenge to pray unceasingly, the Orthodox Tradition offers the Jesus Prayer, which is sometimes called "the prayer of the heart." The Jesus Prayer is offered as a means of concentration, as a focal point for our inner life. Though there are both longer and shorter versions, the most frequently used form of the Jesus Prayer is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This prayer, in its simplicity and clarity, is rooted in the Scriptures and the new life granted by the Holy Spirit. It is first and foremost a prayer of the Spirit because of the fact that the prayer addresses Jesus as Lord, Christ and Son of God; and as St. Paul tells us, "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" *(1 Corinthians 12:3)*.

THE SCRIPTURAL ROOTS OF THE JESUS PRAYER

The Scriptures give the Jesus Prayer both its concrete form and its theological content. It is rooted in the Scriptures in four ways:



1. In its brevity and simplicity, it is the fulfillment of Jesus' command that "in praying" we are "not to heap up empty phrases as the heathen do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them." *(Matthew 6:7-8)*.

2. The Jesus Prayer is rooted in the Name of the Lord. In the Scriptures, the power and glory of God are present in his Name. In the Old Testament to deliberately and attentively invoke God's Name was to place oneself in his Presence. Jesus, whose name in Hebrew means God saves, is the living Word addressed to humanity. Jesus is the final Name of God. Jesus is "the Name which is above all other names" and it is written that "all beings should bend the knee at the Name of Jesus" *(Philippians 2:9-10)*. In this Name devils are cast out *(Luke 10:17)*, prayers are answered *(John 14:13-14)* and the lame are healed *(Acts 3:6-7)*. The Name of Jesus is unbridled spiritual power.

3. The words of the Jesus Prayer are themselves based on Scriptural texts: the cry of the blind man sitting at the side of the road near Jericho, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me" *(Luke 18:38)*; the ten lepers who "called to him, Jesus, Master, take pity on us' " *(Luke 17:13)*; and the cry for mercy of the publican, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" *(Luke 18:14)*.

4. It is a prayer in which the first step of the spiritual journey is taken: the recognition of our own sinfulness, our

essential estrangement from God and the people around us. The Jesus Prayer is a prayer in which we admit our desperate need of a Savior. For "if we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves and refusing to admit the truth" *(1 John 1:8)*.

THE THREE LEVELS OF PRAYER

Because prayer is a living reality, a deeply personal encounter with the living God, it is not to be confined to any given classification or rigid analysis. However, in order to offer some broad, general guidelines for those interested in using the Jesus Prayer to develop their inner life, Theophan the Recluse, a 19th century Russian spiritual writer and saint, distinguishes three levels in the saying of the Prayer:

1. It begins as oral prayer or prayer of the lips, a simple recitation which Theophan defines as prayers' "verbal expression and shape." Although very important, this level of prayer is still external to us and thus only the first step, for "the essence or soul of prayer is within a man's mind and heart."

2. As we enter more deeply into prayer, we reach a level at which we begin to pray without distraction. At this point, St. Theophan remarks, "the mind is focused upon the words" of the Prayer, "speaking them as if they were our own."

3. The third and final level is prayer of the heart. At this stage prayer is no longer something we do but who we are. Such prayer, which is a gift of the Spirit, is to return to the Father as did the prodigal son *(Luke 15:32)*. The prayer of the heart is the prayer of adoption, when "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit that cries 'Abba, Father!'" *(Galatians 4:6)*.

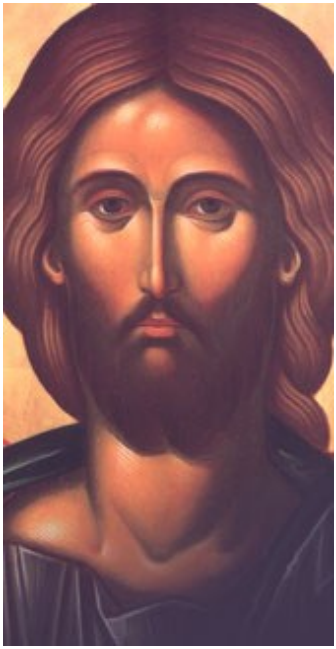
THE FRUITS OF THE JESUS PRAYER

This return to the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit is the goal of all Christian spirituality. It is to be open to the presence of the Kingdom in our midst. The anonymous author of *The Way of the Pilgrim* reports that the Jesus

Prayer has two very concrete effects upon his vision of the world:

First, it transfigures his relation ship with the material creation around him; the world becomes transparent, a sign, a means of communicating God's presence. He writes: *"When I prayed in my heart, everything around me seemed delightful and marvelous. The trees, the grass, the birds, the air, the light seemed to be telling me that they existed for man's sake, that they witnessed to the love of God for man, that all things prayed to God and sang his praise."*

Second, the Jesus Prayer transfigures his relationship to his fellow human beings. His relationships are given form within their proper context: the forgiveness and compassion of the crucified and risen Lord. *"Again I started off on my wanderings. But now I did not walk along as before, filled with care. The invocation of the Name of Jesus gladdened my way. Everybody was kind to me. If anyone harms me I have only to think, 'How sweet is the Prayer of Jesus!' and the injury and the anger alike pass away and I forget it all."*



ENDLESS GROWTH

"Growth in prayer has no end," Theophan informs us. "If this growth ceases, it means that life ceases." The way of the heart is endless because the God whom we seek is infinite in the depths of his glory. The Jesus Prayer is a signpost along the spiritual journey, a journey that all of us must take.

APPENDIX

The purpose of this pamphlet is merely to introduce the practice of the Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer cannot be separated from the sacramental life of the Church and asceticism. The following books are recommended for further study:

The Art of Prayer edited with an introduction by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware (Faber and Faber) 1966

The Power of the Name by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware (SLG Press) 1974

The Way of a Pilgrim translated by R. M. French (Seabury Press) 1965

Christ is in our Midst by Father John of New Valaamo (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press) 1980

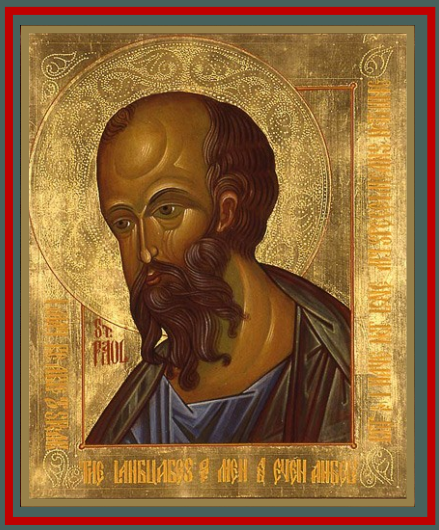
The Jesus Prayer by Frederica Mathewes-Green (Paraclete Press, 2009)

The Jesus Prayer by Father Lev Gillet (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press) 1987

If the prayer "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me"
is constantly on your mind and on your lips,
and the Name of Jesus is always in your heart
in the way that air circulates in our lungs
or feeds the flame of a candle,
how happy it will make you!

The sun, as it rises over the earth, brings day,
and the holy and venerable Name of the Lord Jesus,
when it begins to shine continually in our minds,
produces countless mystical understandings,
all as bright as sunlight.

– St. Hesychios of Sinai (8th century AD)



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