

## Jeans: On The Jesus Prayer

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On a Tuesday morning in January, the weekly Bible Study group came upon I Thessalonians 5:17, and spent an entire class on it. It is a famous verse among Orthodox because of its connection with a book called *The Way of the Pilgrim*. A pilgrim was visiting a Church one Sunday and heard it read. He was so struck and perplexed by the verse that he set out on a journey to discover its meaning. How could it be possible to tend to daily activities and fulfill this commandment to be praying continuously? How is it learned? So he sets out, and at the beginning of his journey has three encounters which lead him to discover its meaning.

The first person he encountered is described as a pious gentleman. The pilgrim asks the question: "How is it possible to be praying unceasingly?" The gentleman gave the following answer: "Unceasing inner prayer is a continuous longing of the human spirit for God. But in order to succeed in this sweet practice we must pray more and ask God to teach us unceasing prayer. Pray more and with fervor. It is prayer itself that will teach you it can be done without ceasing; however, it will require some time." The pious gentleman reveals that there is a continuous longing present in those who pray, but he does not tell the pilgrim the source of this longing. Secondly, he gives him the bad news. If you have this desire, it's going to take an enormous amount of effort that involves praying more often, with more fervor, and seeking assistance directly from God. In our instant messaging and instant communication culture, this advice may seem very heavy to our ears. The pilgrim, however, was not satisfied with the answer because he wasn't told how it can be done.

Continuing on, he walked over 50 miles and came upon an Abbot of a monastery and asked the question again. The Abbot responded: "The words of the Apostle be praying unceasingly should be interpreted as referring to the prayer of the mind, for the mind can always be soaring to God and pray without ceasing." "But," the pilgrim said, "won't you indicate to me the means by which the mind can always be directed to God without being disturbed in its unceasing prayer?" "This indeed is very difficult unless God Himself bestows upon one such a gift," answered the Abbot, and he offered no further explanations. It should be noted that the word mind does not refer to one's intellect, but to that aspect of the soul that communicates directly with God. How is this accomplished? The Abbot affirmed that it is a very difficult task and that God ultimately

is the One Who grants such a gift. The pilgrim leaves the next day from the monastery saddened by his incapacity to understand this verse of St. Paul.

The pilgrim continued to walk for another five days along a road. Then he came upon an elderly man who looked as if he belonged to the clergy. He invited the pilgrim to stay at the guesthouse of his monastery. The pilgrim responded that he was not interested in lodging and food, but was seeking spiritual guidance. The monk asked him what was troubling him. After he explained his dilemma, the monk responded: "Give thanks to God, my beloved brother, for He has awakened you to the irresistible longing for unceasing, inner prayer. Acknowledge in it the voice of our Lord...There are many virtues that are required of a good Christian, but above all else he must pray; for nothing can ever be achieved without prayer. Otherwise, he cannot find his way to God, he cannot grasp the truth, he cannot crucify the flesh with all its passions and desires, find the Light of Christ in his heart, and be united to our Lord. Frequent prayer must precede all things before they can be brought about." As they approached the monastery, the monk invited him to his cell so that he could explain to him the meaning of unceasing prayer. He began by saying: "The constant inner Prayer of Jesus is an unbroken, perpetual, calling upon the Divine Name of Jesus with the lips, the mind and the heart, while picturing His lasting presence in one's own imagination and imploring His grace wherever one is, in whatever one does, even while one sleeps. This prayer consists of the following words: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" The pilgrim was taught the Jesus Prayer.

The Jesus Prayer is the prayer of Orthodox Christians living in the world. He then told him there was a book, *The Philokalia*, that would be very helpful in learning the practice of the Jesus Prayer. *The Philokalia* is actually five volumes on the spiritual life, four of which have been translated into English. It is a collection of writings from the fourth through the fourteenth centuries from masters who spent their lives in prayer. There exists an additional volume, in English, which is an anthology of passages just on the Prayer of the Heart which was first published in English in 1951. The monk then began to read a passage from St. Symeon the New Theologian: "Take a seat in solitude and silence. Bend your head, close your eyes, and breathing softly, in your imagination, look into your own heart. Let your mind, or rather your thoughts, flow from your head down to your heart and say, while breathing: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. Whisper these words gently, or say them in your mind. Discard all other thoughts. Be serene, persevering, and repeat them over and over again." Sitting in solitude and silence sets the conditions for practicing the prayer. Finding a quiet time at home undisturbed by the hustle and bustle of daily life takes some planning. Once it is found, take a seat, bending your head toward your chest with closed eyes, breathing softly, looking into your heart, and say the prayer.

The heart is the center of one's identity; it is here that the Kingdom of God dwells, and the passions. Obedience is not a popular word in our culture, yet it is the first and most important step in the transformation of one's heart. In the words of St. Gregory of Sinai,

“On your path to obedience to the commandments seek the Lord in your heart. When you listen to John, crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, understand by these words commandments for the heart as well as for actions; for it is impossible rightly to follow the commandments and to do rightly unless the heart too is right.” Christ is found in the heart the moment we have cleansed it by obedience to God’s commandments, including the eleventh to love one another even as I have loved you. “Since ye have purified your souls in obedience to the truth through the Spirit to unfeigned brotherly love, love one another intensely out of a pure heart” (1 Peter 1:22). Obedience is seen as even a greater help in the spiritual life than fasting. “Those who struggle regain their original state by keeping two commandments- obedience and fasting; for all evil entered into the generation of mortals through practices opposed to them. Those who keep the commandments through obedience ascend to God more quickly than those who fast. . .Obedience is more suitable for beginners, and fasting for those on the way, who possess courage and vision of mind. But in fulfilling the commandments it is given to very few to always obey God undeceived” (St. Gregory of Sinai).

As the New Year always inspires changes in our lives for the positive, I pray that we may take prayer more seriously as a community. Sunday, February 20, marks what I have termed the “spring training” of Great Lent- the opening of the book of the Triodion. These pre-Lenten Sundays mark a calling to return, renew and transform our lives in Christ. May the Jesus Prayer become a well of spiritual blessings that flows with the grace of God. May we make some holes in the knees of our jeans.

In Christ,  
Fr. Andrew