

ESTABLISHING A DAILY RULE OF PRAYER

Prayer has been called the breath of the soul. In the same way that the body needs proper daily nourishment and exercise to maintain a healthy state, and the mind needs productive stimulation to learn and develop, the soul needs prayer to grow and thrive. Prayer keeps the soul properly oriented towards God in the same way that a compass keeps a ship at sea oriented toward its destination. When a vessel leaves port and heads out into the open seas it is not sufficient for the captain to set his course heading only once. Constant course corrections are required to counteract the effect of the waves, winds, and currents that nudge it constantly off course. Likewise, prayer helps us maintain a constant heading when the distractions of life, temptations, and apathy blow us off course.

Prayer also serves to give our lives a spiritual context. A story can illustrate this point. A young executive boards a subway train one evening to begin his daily journey home. He is consumed with the demands of his stressful job and the briefcase full of work he carries with him. As he settles into his seat and opens his laptop he becomes aware of a well-dressed man across the aisle from him and the two small children accompanying him. The children are restless and noisy and soon begin to tax the patience of the young executive. Exasperated after several miles of fruitless attempts to concentrate on his work, he looks up at the well-dressed man and, making no effort to conceal his annoyance, asks him to keep his children quiet. The well-dressed man replies as if from a distance and relates to the young executive that he and his children are returning from the funeral service of his wife and their mother and that he is somewhat out of sorts, nevertheless promising to keep his children quieter. Greatly chagrined, the young executive undergoes a radical paradigm shift. The context of his ride home that evening changes dramatically. No longer concerned about his workload, his attention is immediately focused on how he can assist the grieving father and his children.

As we move throughout the events of our days, it is easy for us to get side-tracked from the context that God intends to keep always before us, that of our abiding in His love and allowing Him to make us instruments of His love to those around us. Daily prayer helps us to restore that proper context.

The Tradition of Daily Prayer

Historically, Christians have been encouraged to pray at least three times a day, morning, noonday, and evening. Specific prayers have been developed around these times as they relate to our own passage through time. So, for example, upon waking in the morning we remember the prayer of St. Basil that begins: "As I rise from sleep I thank you O Holy Trinity..."

We also remember the saving events of our Lord's life-giving Passion in time when, for example, we pray at mid-day "O Lord Who at this hour stretched forth Your hands for suffering..."

Other appropriate times to pray during the day can be before meals, during breaks at work, while driving in our cars – something we do so frequently that it affords abundant daily prayer time – and whenever else the need arises. As we work on creating a context of prayer throughout our day, we will find more and more occasions for prayer.

The Lord's Prayer

When the disciples asked the Lord to teach them to pray, He responded by teaching them the Lord's Prayer. This prayer has become the cornerstone and model of Christian prayer since that time. It contains all the essential elements of a healthy prayer life; praise and adoration, confession, supplication, and thanksgiving. The ancient Jewish prayer practice encouraged prayer to God seven times a day, and the early Church taught that the Lord's Prayer should be said at least three times daily. Praying the Lord's Prayer morning, noon, and evening constitutes a good beginning towards establishing a daily rule of prayer.

This can be expanded to include the Trisagion prayers (in the Eastern Orthodox tradition), the most basic element of liturgical prayer. This set of prayers begins with the prayer to the Holy Spirit: "O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere present and fillest all things, treasury of good gifts and Giver of Life, come and abide in us, and cleanse us from all impurity, and save our souls, O Good One." The Trisagion prayer continues: "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us" (three times), "O Most Holy Trinity have mercy on us; O Lord blot out our sins; O Master pardon our iniquity; O Holy One visit and heal our infirmities for Thy Name's sake", and ends with the Lords Prayer.

Daily prayers can be further augmented with the inclusion of the Nicene Creed, Psalm 51, David's beautiful prayer of confession, and prayers appropriate to the time of day.

There are general petitions which help us frame our petitions to God. They include prayers for the Church, our spiritual and temporal leaders, armed forces and civil authorities, our city, family members, god-children, friends, the poor, homeless, aged, those under persecution, ourselves, and our departed loved ones. This general petition gives shape and constancy to our daily prayers by reminding us of our connectedness to the Church, our family, and society. It also helps keep our petitions from degenerating into a laundry-list of rather petty concerns.

It is also vital to our spiritual health to include time to thank God for the specific blessings He has brought about in our lives. These thanksgivings can be spontaneous when our hearts swell with joy at some unexpected blessing. They also serve to remind us of God's presence in our lives over the years when things seem bleak to us.

Standing with the Mind in the Heart Before God

St. Theophan the Recluse, a nineteenth century Russian saint, wrote that prayer is standing with the mind in the heart before God. Ultimately, prayer is not about words, whether formal or extemporaneous. Rather, it is the state of *being* in God's presence. The Patristic

tradition of the Church teaches us that prayer can eventually become *infused* prayer, wherein we learn to "pray without ceasing," as St. Paul enjoins us.

The end of spoken prayer is silence. Silence is an unwelcome phenomenon in modern life and we have effectively eradicated it from society. Television, radio, media, 24-hour news channels, *Muzak*, cell-phones, pagers, wireless internet; all of these modern contrivances ensure that we need never face silence. However, Christians are encouraged to include as part of their daily prayer life a Rule of Silence. This helps us to maintain a disciplined mind and gives us time to hear God speak to us in the ordinary day-to-day activities of our lives.

In summary, a daily rule of prayer is essential for the health of our soul. A rule of prayer helps to keep us oriented toward the Kingdom of God and creates a Christian context to our lives. The tradition of the Church in terms of a minimum standard is three times a day: morning, noon, and evening. A rule of prayer can include but is not limited to; the Trisagion prayers, prayers appropriate to the day, the Nicene Creed, Ps. 51 as a daily confession, and a general petition to which should be added our own specific needs.

Consider beginning with the Morning and Evening prayers and eventually adding either First Hour or Third Hour (the Noon Office). A rule of prayer should also include a time of silence. And a fruitful relationship with one's pastor and spiritual guidance is essential in the development of a rule of prayer.

Prayer is the bedrock of our spiritual life. Without it, the soul languishes and withers. With it, the soul can breathe and flourish. "Prayer is the living water, by means of which the soul quenches its thirst." [1]

Credits

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[1] *Father John of Kronstadt, Spiritual Counsels, edited by W. Jardine Grisbrooke, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1989, p. 28.*