

Contemplative Ways: The Jesus Prayer

There are many methods of interacting with God, maybe as many as there are people, but my favorite is the Orthodox method, handed down by the Desert Fathers. Technically this prayer would be known as Hesychasm, the prayer of rest or quiet. But it comes to us today maybe better known as, “The Jesus Prayer.”

Many of you know this little prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." And there are a few variations, including a very short one, "Lord, mercy." And I am going to assume here that if you are reading this blog you know all about being still, breathing, attention, repeating the prayer, etc... Therefore I am going to focus on an aspect of the Orthodox model that often gets overlooked: the factor of where in our being the Orthodox Fathers would like us to say our prayer from - our “nous,” which dwells in our heart. In the Orthodox view¹ it is our heart that steers the ship of our being, (and I think we would agree with that, to a point, as we are to “Watch over our heart with all diligence, for from it flows the spring of life (Prov 4:23)).” However in our heart, in the Orthodox view, is the core of our being - our “nous.” In our Western thinking we would equate the nous with the “inner man,” however the Orthodox concept is a bit more difficult to grasp, and I must admit I am still struggling with it. Therefore let me give you the Orthodox definition out of the Philokalia:²

Intellect - nous - the highest faculty in man, through which - provided it is purified - he knows God or the inner apprehension of spiritual perception. Unlike the dianoia, the intellect does not function by formulating abstract concepts and then arguing on this basis to a conclusion reached through deductive reasoning, but it understands divine truth by means of immediate experience, intuition or simple cognition, The intellect dwells in the depths of the soul, it constitutes the innermost aspect of the heart. The intellect (nous) is the organ of contemplation, the eye of the heart.³

Yes, that paragraph is confusing. But to be honest those who are drawn to contemplation have been working with the nous, or this “inner spiritual perception,” for quite a long time now. We just have not always made a clear distinction between the “dianoia” our reasoning faculty, and our “nous⁴” our inner man – as places in our being to function out of. To be aware of this “shift” from one to the other let us try a few different exercises. I do not expect all of these exercises to work for everyone as I think different people coming from different church cultures may need a few different examples for this to make sense. So keep in mind if some of these exercises leave you confused there are more methods below – but hopefully one of the following will work for you to experience the difference between our reasoning faculty (dianoia) and our inner man (nous) that dwells in our heart.

Finding the Nous (Our inner man)

First of all I want you to think of something administrative that you need to do. Take thirty seconds and spend a few minutes planning your next meeting, think through your to-do list, etc...(so quit reading right now and plan!)...after thirty seconds or so...point with your finger to where in your being these thoughts are occurring – and most likely you have pointed at your head (The dianoia as stated from the Philokalia). Which I am sure is not a shock.

1 It is probably good to point out I am not Orthodox myself and many Orthodox may disagree with my application.

2 The Philokalia is a five volume collection of the writings of the Desert Fathers from approximately the fourth to the fifteenth century

3 G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware. *The Philokalia Vol. 2*. London: Faber & Faber 1981. p.384.

4 Again, the nous and inner man, as we think about it, are not exactly the same; the nous is not just our spirit but in some ways how our spirit and soul function with the Holy Spirit in a purified heart. “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God (Matt 5:8).” This seeing involves the Spirit, but also the heart.

Now let's try part two of this same exercise. I want you to take thirty seconds and speak God's word over your life. Just quietly, internally, begin with; "My beloved, you belong to me, I love you and..." just let it flow for awhile and keep it going. (quit reading and just go for it)...when you are done (and don't read further until you are!) point with your finger to where in your being you were experiencing that conversation. Was it in your head, or did you point to your heart – where your nous/ inner man is?⁵

Let us try this another way as that last exercise may have been a bit weird for some of you: I want you to pray for someone, someone you really love, that you hope the best for and care about, someone that is "on your heart." Pray for them for thirty seconds (again, no peeking ahead)...and when you are done praying, point with your finger to where in your being you were experiencing that prayer. More than likely your finger went to your chest (heart area) – as you have discovered something going on in your inner man, or nous.

It may be good before we move on to application to think of a few other ways we experience this (to make sure we include everyone). Have you ever been in church during an open microphone time and you just knew it was your turn to go up front and speak – but you didn't want to go up? What part of you was arguing? Point with your finger to where those argumentative thoughts were happening in your being. Now where did you feel the tug of the Lord drawing you to go up front of the church to speak? Most likely you felt the tug of the Lord in the inner most man – in the heart or chest. This is not as strange an experience as it may seem. When you have made a big decision in your life and you had to wrestle it through you probably needed to come to peace "in your heart." Even though your mind was throwing out all kinds of options in regards to your situation it was in your inner man you needed to find that rest. For the Orthodox contemplatives – it is from this place they pray. As stated by the Apostle Paul:

...that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height-- to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:16-19

What Does Prayer of the Heart Look Like?

Now that we have a very small handle on this inner mystery let us look at how the Desert Fathers would like us to proceed. Here is an extract from the Philokalia⁶ written by Callistus, Patriarch of Constantinople around 1360ad:

"If you wish to pray as you ought, imitate the dulcimer player; bending his head a little and inclining his ear to the strings, he strikes the strings, skilfully, and enjoys the melody he draws from their harmonious notes.

Is this example clear to you? The dulcimer is the heart; (where the nous is), the strings-- the feelings, the hammer- remembrance of God; the player---the mind. By remembrance of God and of Divine things the mind draws holy feelings from the God-fearing heart, then ineffable sweetness fills the soul, and the mind, which is pure, is lit up by Divine illuminations.

The Dulcimer (heart) player perceives and hears nothing but the melody he enjoys. So the mind, during active prayer, descends into the depths of the heart with sobriety and can no longer listen to aught but God.

5 Keep in mind we need to test any revelation from the Lord we receive with: scripture, others, fruit, confirmation, inner witness, etc...

6 The word "Philokalia," means, "the love of the beautiful."

All his inner being (nous) speaks to God with the voice of David: “My soul followeth hard after thee.”⁷

The heart, in this model of prayer, (as we practiced pointing our finger earlier) – is the focal point of the contemplative's attention. So when the Orthodox Desert Fathers say things like “So the mind, during active prayer, descends into the depths of the heart...” This is what they are talking about – moving from “dianoia” to “nous.” From “reason” to “inner man.” And it may be good to point out, that to the Orthodox contemplative, by following this model as illustrated by Callistus, they are fulfilling the first great commandment – to love God with all of their heart, mind, soul, and strength.⁸ All these different aspects of the individual are involved in this method.

Here is another example that may be helpful, taken from the Russian Orthodox classic “The Way of the Pilgrim.” In this book Pilgrim has just figured out what Callistus was talking about – and experiences this:

When about three weeks had passed (as Pilgrim had been focusing on his nous) I felt a pain in my heart, and then a most delightful warmth, as well as consolation and peace. This aroused me still more and more and spurred me on to give great care to the saying of the prayer so that all my thoughts were taken up with it and I felt a very great joy. From this time I began to have from time to time a number of different feelings in my heart and mind. Sometimes my heart would feel as though it were bubbling with joy; such lightness, freedom, and consolation were in it. Sometimes I felt a burning love for Jesus Christ and for all God's creatures. Sometimes my eyes brimmed over with tears of thankfulness to God, who was so merciful to me, a wretched sinner. Sometimes my understanding, which had been so stupid before, was given so much light that I could easily grasp and dwell upon matters of which, up to now, I had not been able to even to think of at all. Sometimes that sense of a warm gladness in my heart spread throughout my whole being and I was deeply moved as the fact of the presence of God everywhere was brought home to me. Sometimes by calling upon the name of Jesus I was overwhelmed with bliss, and now I knew the meaning of the words “The Kingdom of God is within you.”⁹

What Pilgrim describes above is the true fruit of this prayer and I would recommend to all of you who are interested in “The Jesus Prayer” to read Pilgrim's wonderful little book. “The Way of the Pilgrim” is a great starting point to practice “the Jesus Prayer” from an Orthodox perspective.

How to Practice the Jesus Prayer in the Orthodox Way

Here are the steps to this model of prayer. And again it is another style, and there are many, so please don't feel constrained by it. Nevertheless, for me, this method of contemplative prayer has revolutionized my life.

- 1) Find the place of the heart, as described above.
- 2) From this place love the Lord your God with all your heart. (For example try giving thanks for something – let thankfulness rise in your heart.)
- 3) From this same place say your prayer – focus the words of your prayer not from your head, but from your heart where your nous is (The classic Orthodox model being “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!” but you may already have a little prayer of your own, such as “Abba I belong to you,” or, “Maranatha.”).
- 4) If you wish, when you feel the presence of the Lord stop saying the prayer and just be with God

7 E. Kadloubovsky, G.E.H. Palmer. *The Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart*. New York: Faber & Faber 1992. p. 271.

8 Mark 12:30

9 R.M. French. *The Way of the Pilgrim*. New York: Harper 1954. p. 38.

in your heart – and if your mind wanders begin the prayer, from your heart, again.¹⁰

I would think practicing this method of contemplative prayer 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes at night would be a good place to start.¹¹

One last thought. How long is it going to take to get to the point where we experience what Pilgrim experienced? It may be good to keep in mind the advice of another Hesychast, :

Prayer of mind in the heart comes quickly to some people, while for others the process is slow. Thus of three people known to me, it entered into one as soon as he was told about it, in that same hour; to another it came in six months time; to a third after ten months, while in the case of one great Elder it came only after two years. Why this happens so, God only knows.¹²

To some, this length of time needed may seem disheartening. But let me tell you this, when I finally figured out I was to pray from my heart (where my inner man is) and not my head – I had an Epiphany. I was driving my car out in the country, focusing on my inner man, when suddenly such a love gushed up from my inner man I had to stop praying and pull the car over! At that point I had practiced this method of prayer on and off for two years – and it has been worth every minute. In this regards I will conclude by quoting Callistus once again:

If we do not bar our physical senses (learn to pray internally), the fountain of that water that the Lord promised to that woman from Samaria will not gush forth in us. This woman, seeking physical water, found the water of life flowing within her. For, as the earth by nature contains water which it pours forth as soon as an outlet is opened, so the earth of the heart by nature contains this spiritual water which gushes forth as soon as this becomes possible, like the light which our forefather Adam lost through transgression.¹³

The Lord Jesus has promised us an inner well, the Holy Spirit. And no matter what method of contemplative prayer we prefer, it is this unity with Him we seek and long for. Therefore I hope this model of the Jesus Prayer will become another tool in your spiritual toolbox for you to encounter our Beloved. And that over time you will cherish the intimacy with the Lord Jesus this spiritual discipline can bring as much as I do.

Blessings to you!

Murray Dueck

Murray Dueck is the author of *Keepers of the Presence, The roadmap to spiritual sensitivity and God's presence*. Murray also leads *Samuel's Mantle*, a training school teaching people “The language of the Holy Spirit” in the Vancouver area of British Columbia, Canada. He and his wife Kelly live in Abbotsford, BC with their three children. For more information in regards to what Murray is up to and what resources he has to offer please feel free to visit www.samuelsmantle.com

10 Although, typically, most Hesychasts would not stop saying the prayer.

11 However the point of this prayer, for the Hesychast, was to learn to pray without ceasing and therefore develop the inner man to the point he is always praying the prayer in his inner man.

12 Kallistos (Timothy) Ware. *The Art of Prayer*. New York: Faber & Faber 1997. p. 277.

13 E. Kadloubovsky, G.E.H. Palmer. *The Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart*. New York: Faber & Faber 1992. p. 271.