

John Climacus (d. 649), *On Prayer*, in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*

1. Prayer, by reason of its nature, is the converse and union of man with God, and by reason of its action upholds the world and brings about reconciliation with God; it is the mother and also the daughter of tears, the propitiation for sins, a bridge over temptations, a wall against afflictions, a crushing of conflicts, a work of angels, the food of all the bodiless spirits, future gladness, unending activity, a source of virtues, a means of obtaining graces, invisible progress, food of the soul, enlightenment of the mind, an axe against despair, a demonstration of hope, a cure for sorrow, the wealth of monks, the treasure of hesychasts, the reduction of anger, the mirror of progress, the disclosure of stature, an indication of one's condition, a revelation of future things, and a sign of glory. For him who truly prays, prayer is the court, the judgment hall and the tribunal of the Lord before the judgment to come.

[Step 27] Those whose mind has learned true prayer converse with the Lord face to face, as if speaking into the ear of the emperor. Those who make vocal prayer fall down before Him as if in the presence of the whole senate. But those who live in the world petition the emperor amidst the clamor of the crowds. If you have learned the art of prayer scientifically, you cannot fail to know what I have said.

5. Let your prayer be completely simple. For both the publican and the prodigal son were reconciled to God by a single phrase. 9. Do not be over-sophisticated in the words you use when praying, because the simple and unadorned lisping of children has often won the heart of their Heavenly Father. 10. Do not try to be verbose when you pray, lest your mind be distracted in searching for words. One word of the publican propitiated God, and one cry of faith saved the thief. Loquacity in prayer often distracts the mind and leads to phantasy, whereas brevity makes for concentration.

6. The work of prayer is one and the same for all, but there are many kinds of prayer and many different prayers. Some converse with God as with a friend and master, interceding with praise and petition, not for themselves but for others. Some strive for greater [spiritual] riches and glory and for confidence in prayer. Others ask for complete deliverance from their adversary. Some beg to receive some kind of rank; others for complete forgiveness of debts. Some ask to be released from prison; others for remission from offences.

7. Before all else, let us list sincere thanksgiving first on the scroll of our prayer. On the second line, we should put confession and heartfelt contrition of soul. Then let us present our petition to the King of all. This is the best way of prayer, as it was shown to one of the brethren by an angel of the Lord.

13. Though you may have climbed the whole ladder of the virtues, pray for forgiveness of sins. Listen to the cry of Paul regarding sinners: Of whom I am chief. 15. If you are clothed in all meekness and freedom from anger, you will not have much trouble in loosing your mind from captivity. 44. Be very merciful if you care about prayer. For through mercy, monks shall receive a hundredfold, and the rest in the future life.

16. Until we have acquired genuine prayer, we are like people teaching children to begin to walk.

17. Try to lift up, or rather, to enclose your thought within the words of your prayer, and if in its infant state it wearies and falls, lift it up again. Instability is natural to the mind, but God is powerful to establish all things. If you persevere indefatigably in this labour, He who sets the bounds to the sea of the mind will visit you too, and during your prayer will say to the waves: Thus far shall ye come and no further. Spirit cannot be bound; but where the Creator of the spirit is, everything obeys.

19. The beginning of prayer consists in banishing by a single thought the thoughts that assault us at the very moment that they appear; the middle stage consists in confining our minds to what is being said and thought; and its perfection is rapture in the Lord. 20. One kind of joy occurs at the time of prayer for those living in a community, and another comes to those who pray in stillness. The one is perhaps somewhat elated, but the other is wholly filled with humility.

25. Rise from love of the world and love of pleasure, lay aside cares, strip your mind, renounce your body; because prayer is nothing other than estrangement from the world, visible and invisible. For what have I in heaven? Nothing. And what have I desired on earth beside Thee? Nothing, but to cling continually to Thee in prayer without distraction. To some, wealth is pleasant; to others, glory; to others, possessions; but my wish is to cling to God, and to put the hope of my dispassion in Him.

29. Do not say, after spending a long time at prayer, that nothing has been gained; for you have already gained something. And what higher good is there than to cling to the Lord and persevere in unceasing union with Him?

31. Prepare yourself for your set times of prayer by unceasing prayer in your soul, and you will soon make progress. I have seen those who shone in obedience and who tried, as far as they could, to keep in mind the remembrance of God, and the moment they stood in prayer they were at once masters of their minds, and shed streams of tears, because they were prepared for this beforehand by holy obedience.

33. War proves the soldier's love for his king; but the time and discipline of prayer show the monk's love for God. 34. Your prayer will show you what condition you are in. Theologians say that prayer is the monk's mirror.

41. He who possesses the Lord will no longer express his object in prayer, for then, within him, the Spirit maketh intercession for him with groanings that cannot be uttered.

60. He who keeps constant hold of the staff of prayer will not stumble. And even if he does, his fall will not be fatal. For prayer is a devout coercion of God.

64. Have all courage, and you will have God for your teacher in prayer. Just as it is impossible to learn to see by word of mouth, because seeing depends on one's own natural sight, so it is impossible to learn the beauty of prayer from the teaching of others. Prayer has a Teacher all its own—God—that teaches man knowledge, and grants the prayer of him who prays, and blesses the years of the just. Amen.