

*Epistle on Prayer, The Cloud of Unknowing, The Epistle of Privy Council (c. 1350)*

You have asked me how to control your mind when you are saying your prayers, and I will do my best to answer. What I would say is this: I think what is going to help you most when you start your prayer - and it doesn't matter whether it is long or short or what - is to make quite sure that you are certain that you will die by the time it is ended, that you will finish before your prayer does! Now don't go thinking that I am asking anything crazy! Why? There is not a man alive today who would dare deny its possibility, to say you would necessarily live longer than your prayer. So it is quite in order for you to think this way.

But dread is no good as a foundation for anything unless it is for even more dread, the kind that sinks down into deep depression. So you must link your original idea with this further thought: you are to believe that if through the grace of God you can clearly speak the words of your prayer and bring it to its conclusion, or if you do die before you reach the end having done what you could, then God will accept it as full payment for all your neglect from the time your life began up to that very moment.

Amendment depends on two things: departing from evil, and doing good. There are no quicker ways of achieving these than those two thoughts already mentioned. For what can better take away the love of sinning from one's life than a real fear of death? And what moves one to live more fervently and to do good more than confident hope in the mercy and goodness of God, brought about by this second thought?

Almighty God in his goodness has shown innumerable kindnesses to every living soul. And they are more than enough to cause us to love him with all our heart and mind and strength. Yet were it possible, however unlikely, for a soul to be as fine and strong and clever as all the saints and angels put together, but never to have had opportunity to appreciate the worthiness of God or his kindness, such a soul when he saw the love of God as it is in himself and in all its abundance, would be ravished out of himself to love God until his heart would burst, so lovely, so attractive, so good, and so splendid is he.

I am not saying - though I could well do so - that we are not to love him much because of his gifts, but rather that we should love him infinitely more for his own sake. What I am meaning when I talk about perfection and the reward of this reverent affection can be expressed in a more lofty way: a perfect soul, whose affection has been touched by the conscious presence of God as he is in himself, and whose reason has been enlightened by the clear beam of eternal light (which is God) so that he sees and feels the loveliness of God in himself, at that moment loses all recollection of any good or kind thing that God has ever done for him. What previously caused him to love God he now neither feels nor sees, for he has God himself.

So although in speaking of perfection in general it could be said that the great goodness and kindness that God shows us in this life are sufficient and exalted reasons for loving God, yet, since we are concerned with the aim and attainment of perfection (which is the underlying purpose of my writing), a perfect lover of God, fearful of hindering perfection, at this time seeks as the end of his perfection no other cause for loving God than God himself. Which is what I mean when I say that chaste love is to love God for himself and not for what he gives.

In itself prayer is nothing else than a devout setting of our will in the direction of God in order to get good, and remove evil. Since all evil is summed up in sin, considered causally or essentially, when we pray with intention for the removing of evil, we should neither say, think, nor mean any more than this little word 'sin'. And if we pray with intention for the acquiring of goodness, let us pray, in word or thought or desire, no other word than 'God'. For in God is all good, for he is its beginning and its being.

Feel sin in its totality - as a lump - without specifying any particular part, and that all of it is you. And then cry ceaselessly in your spirit this one thing: 'Sin! Sin! Sin! Help! Help! Help!' This spiritual cry is better learned from God by experience than from any man by word. It is best when it is entirely spiritual, unpremeditated and unuttered. On occasion perhaps the over-full heart will burst out into words, because body and soul alike are filled with sorrow, and the burden of sin. In the same way too you should use this little word 'God'. Fill your spirit with its inner meaning, without considering any one of his works in particular.

Just as the meditations of those who seek to live the contemplative life come without warning, so, too, do their prayers. I am thinking of their private prayers, of course, not those laid down by Holy Church. For true contemplatives could not value such prayers more, and so they use them, in the form and according to the rules laid down by the holy Fathers before us. But their own personal prayers rise spontaneously to God, without bidding of premeditation, beforehand or during their prayer. If they are in words, as they seldom are, then they are very few words; the fewer the better. If it is a little word of one syllable, I think it is better than if it is of two, and more in accordance with the work of the Spirit. For a contemplative should always live at the highest, topmost peak spiritually.

See to it that there is nothing at work in your mind or will but only God. Try to suppress all knowledge and feeling of anything less than God, and trample it down deep under the cloud of forgetting. You must understand that in this business you are to forget not only all other things than yourself (and their doings - and your own!) but to forget also yourself, and even the things you have done for the sake of God. For it is the way of the perfect lover not only to love what he loves more than himself, but also in some sort to hate himself for the sake of what he loves. So you are to do with yourself. You must loathe and tire of all that goes on in your mind and your will unless it is God.

When you have reached the state of recollection, do not worry about the next step, but just stop thinking your 'good' thoughts as well as your 'bad' ones. Do not pray with words unless you feel you have to, and even then, if you do, do not bother about their being many or few. See that nothing occupies your thoughts except an utter determination to reach out to God: no special thought about what he is, or how he works, but only that he is as he is. Let him be himself, please, and nothing else. You are not to go probing into him with your smart and subtle ideas.

That belief must be your foundation; this utter determination, firmly based as it is on true belief, must be the simple recognition and blind acceptance of your own existence, and no more than this, either intellectually or emotionally. It is as if you were saying to God, 'What I am, Lord, I offer you. I am not thinking of you in any particular way, except that you are as you are, no more and no less'. That humble and intellectual darkness must be reflected in all your thinking.