

**Walter Hilton (1343-1396), *The Scale (Ladder) of Perfection***

Prayer is profitable, and a useful means of getting purity of heart through the destruction of sin and the reception of virtues. Not that you should by your prayer tell our Lord what you desire, for he knows all your needs well enough; but by your prayer make yourself able and ready like a clean vessel to receive the grace that our Lord will freely give you, and this cannot be felt until you are purified by the fire of desire in devout prayer. Although it is true that prayer is not the cause for which our Lord gives grace, nevertheless it is a way by which grace, freely given, comes to a soul.

In your prayer you must not aim your heart at a material thing, but your whole effort must be to draw your thoughts inward from any attention to such things, so that your desire might be as it were bare and naked from all that is earthly, always rising upward into God. . . . For prayer is nothing but a desire of the heart rising into God by its withdrawal from all earthly thoughts; and so it is compared to a fire, which of its own nature leaves the lowness of the earth and always goes up into the air. Just so, when desire in prayer has been touched and set alight by the spiritual fire which is God, it keeps rising naturally to him from whom it came.

You are to understand that there are three kinds of prayer. The first is spoken prayer made especially by God, and made even more generally by the ordinance of holy church, like Matins, Evensong and the Hours; made too by the devout from other special sayings, for example to our Lord and our Lady, and to his saints. [Best form for those just at the beginning of conversion.]

The second kind of prayer is spoken, but without any particular set of words, and this is when a man or woman feels the grace of devotion by the gift of God, and in his devotion speaks to him as if he were bodily in his presence. He uses the words that best match his inward stirring for the time and that have come to his mind following the different concerns he feels in his heart, rehearsing either his sins and his wickedness, or the malice and tricks of the Enemy, or else the goodness and mercy of God. . . . And it also seems to him that there is so much goodness, grace and mercy in God that he is glad to praise and thank him with great affection from the heart. This kind of prayer greatly pleases God for it is the affection of the heart.

The third kind of prayer is only in the heart, without speaking, and with great rest of body and soul. Anyone who is to pray well in this way needs to have a pure heart, for it belongs to those men and women who by long labor of body and soul—or else by such sharp striking of love as I mentioned—come into rest of spirit, so that their affection is turned into spiritual savor, and so that they can pray in their heart continually, glorifying and praising God, without great hindrance from temptations or vanities. . . . The fire of love shall always be alight in the soul of a devout man or woman, which is the altar of our Lord; and every day in the morning the priest shall lay sticks and nourish the fire. That is to say, This man shall nourish the fire of love in his heart with holy psalms, pure thoughts and fervent desires, so that it never goes out.

When you are about to pray, make your intention and your will at the beginning as complete and pure toward God as you can, briefly in your mind, and then begin and do as you can. And however badly you are hindered from your first resolve, do not be too fearful, or too angry with yourself, or impatient against God for not giving you that savor and spiritual sweetness with

devotion (as it seems to you) he gives to other creatures. Instead, see by it your own weakness and bear it easily, holding your prayer in your own sight (simple as it is) with humbleness of heart, also trusting confidently in the mercy of our Lord that he will make it good—more than you know or feel; and if you do so, all shall be well. . . . For there are many souls who are unable ever to find rest of heart in prayer, but struggle with their thoughts all their lifetime, hindered and troubled by them. If they keep themselves in humility and charity in other respects, they shall have very great reward in heaven for their labor.

It so happens sometimes that grace stirs the soul to prayer; and how the soul prays then, I shall tell you. The soul does not pray then in the way it did before, or in the common manner of men—in a loud voice or by speaking out fluently—but in a very great stillness of voice and gentleness of heart. The reason is that the soul is not troubled or teased with outward things but wholly gathered together in itself, and the soul is set as if in the spiritual presence of Jesus; and therefore every word and every syllable is pronounced with savor, sweetness, and delight, and with heart and mouth in full accord. For the soul is then all turned into fire of love, and therefore each word that it secretly prays is like a spark springing out of a firebrand, warming all the powers of the soul, turning them into love, and filling them with light; so great is the comfort that the soul is pleased to pray all the time and nothing else. The more it prays, the better it can, and the mightier it is, for grace helps the soul well and makes everything light and easy, so that it is very glad to psalm and sing the praises of God with spiritual joy and heavenly delight.

No fly dares to rest on the lip of a pot boiling over the fire; just so, no carnal delight can rest on a pure soul that is all covered and warmed in the fire of love, boiling and giving off psalms and praises to Jesus. This is true prayer. This prayer is always heard by Jesus; it yields grace to him and receives grace in return; it makes a soul at home and in fellowship with Jesus and with all the angels of heaven. Let anyone make use of it who can, for the work in itself is good and full of grace. . . . For it cannot be done like this except in abundant grace, through the opening of the spiritual eye; and therefore a soul that has this freedom and this grace-given feeling in prayer, with spiritual savor and heavenly delight, has the grace of contemplation in that way.

The prayer of other people who are busied with active works is made of two words, for they often form one word in their hearts, through thinking of worldly affairs, and pronounce another with their mouths, of the psalm sung or said. However, if their intention is true, their prayer is still good and worthy of reward, even if it should lack savor and sweetness. But this kind offered by a contemplative is made of only one word, for it is formed in the heart, so it sounds whole in the mouth, as it were only one thing that both forms and pronounces. And certainly it is no more, for the soul is made whole in itself through grace, parted so far from the carnal nature that it is master of the body, and then the body is like nothing but an instrument and a trumpet of the soul, on which the soul blows sweet notes of spiritual praises to Jesus.

Therefore, because this prayer is so pleasing to Jesus and so profitable to the soul, it is good for anyone newly turned to God to desire this feeling, whatever he may be, if he wants to please him and desires to have some rare feeling of grace; that he might through grace come to this liberty of spirit and offer his prayers and psalms to Jesus continually, constantly and devoutly, with whole attention and burning affection for him, and keep it as a custom when grace will stir him to it. This is a sure feeling, and a true one.