

Let us cry for clemency! (Saint Ignatius Brianchaninoff)

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[Previous Publication: <http://pemptousia.com/2016/05/on-practicing-the-jesus-prayer/>]

Our ordinary condition, the condition of all mankind, is one of fallenness, of spiritual deception, of perdition. Apprehending—and to the degree that we apprehend, experiencing—that condition, let us cry out from it in prayer, let us cry in spiritual humility, let us cry with wails and sighs, let us cry for clemency! Let us turn away from all spiritual gratifications, let us renounce all lofty states of prayer of which we are unworthy and incapable! It is impossible «to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land» (Ps. 136:5), in a heart held captive by passions. Should we hear an invitation to sing, we can know surely that it emanates «from them that have taken us captive» (Ps. 136:3). «By the waters of Babylon» tears alone are possible and necessary (Ps. 136:1).



This is the general rule for practicing the Jesus Prayer, derived from the Sacred Scriptures and the works of the Holy Fathers, and from certain conversations with genuine men of prayer. Of the particular rules, especially for novices, I deem the following worthy of mention.

St. John of the Ladder counsels that the mind should be locked into the words of the prayer and should be forced back each time it departs from it (Step XXVIII, ch. 17). Such a mechanism of prayer is remarkably helpful and suitable. When the mind, in its own manner, acquires attentiveness, then the heart will join it with its own offering—compunction. The heart will empathize with the mind by means of compunction, and the prayer will be said by the mind and heart together. The words of the prayer ought to be said without the least hurry. Even lingering, so that the mind can lock itself into each word. St. John of the Ladder consoles and instructs the coenobitic brethren who busy themselves about monastic obedience and encourages them thus to persevere in prayerful asceticism: «From those monks who are engaged in performing obedience,» he writes, «God does not expect a pure and undistracted prayer. Despair not should inattention come over you! Be of cheerful spirit and constantly compel your mind to return to itself! For the angels alone are not subject to any distraction» (Step IV, ch. 93). «Being enslaved by passions, let us persevere in praying to the Lord: for all those who have reached the state of passionlessness did so with the help of such indomitable prayer. If, therefore, you tirelessly train your mind never to stray from the words of the prayer, it will be there even at mealtime. A great champion of perfect prayer has said: 'I had rather speak five words with my understanding ... than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue' (I Cor. 14:19). Such prayer,» that is, the grace-given prayer of the mind in the heart, which shuns imaginings, «is not

(To be continued)

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