

A LETTER CONCERNING PRAYER

By the author of *The Cloud of unknowing*

Dear spiritual friend in God,

About your question, how to fix your attention while you are at prayer: I will answer you as well as I can - inadequately - and suggest that the most helpful thing to do at the start of your prayer, whatever kind of prayer it might be, whether long or short, is to impress upon your heart without any self-deception, that you will die by the end of your prayer, and, unless you get on with it quickly, before the end. Be sure that this is not just some mind-game that I am suggesting! This is why: really, no-one at all in this life can guarantee otherwise - that is, that you will live longer than your prayer. So you may safely believe it.

I advise you to do this, because if you do, whether because of your general awareness of your own wretchedness, or the particular awareness of how short a time you have to repent, you will find that it will impart a real impulse of fear into your heart. You will feel this impulse really take up residence in your heart - unless you flatter and deceive your treacherous blind mortal heart with nonsense and delusive wishful thinking about living longer - which God forbid. For although it may be true that you will actually live longer, it is always a bad idea to imagine it before hand, and count on it to yourself, because the truth of this is known only to God. You can have no more than a blind waiting on His will, without knowing the exact moment - which is as short as the twinkling of an eye, or maybe less - with any certainty. And therefore, if you want to pray wisely, as the prophet tells us when he says "*psallite sapienter*", see you get this genuine impulse of fear right at the start. For, as the same prophet says, in another psalm, "*Inicium sapientie est timor domini*" - that is, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

But because there is no security in relying on fear only, for fear of falling into depression and despair, you must add to that first thought, this other thought which follows from it. You must firmly make up your mind that if, through the grace of God, you say carefully all the words of that prayer, right to the end, or if, (although you die before you reach the end), you are doing all you can, then God will accept it from you as full payment for all your neglect from the beginning of your life, right up to that moment - providing, of course, that you have, conscientiously and to the best of your knowledge, amended your life according to the ordinary teaching of the Holy Church in Confession. This short prayer, as little as it is, will be accepted from you by God, for your complete salvation if you should die, and for a great increase in your perfection if you should live longer. This is the goodness of God, who, as the prophet says, forsakes no-one who truly trusts in him and means to repent.

And since all repentance has two aspects, the giving up of evil, and the doing of good, there are no better methods of achieving them than the spiritual discipline of the two thoughts mentioned above. For what deprives a life of the attraction towards sin more effectively than a real experience of the fear of death? And what motivates a life more fervently towards good than a confident hope in the goodness and mercy of God which is instilled by the second thought? Because the spiritual experience of the second thought, when it is sincerely joined to the first in this way, will become a sure staff of hope for you, to support you in all your good deeds.

By this staff you may safely climb the mountain of perfection, that is, the perfect love of God, although the beginning will be imperfect, as you will hear later. For, what with the general awareness that you have of the mercy and goodness of God, and this special experience you feel of his mercy and goodness in accepting this tiny little service for such long-standing error, as if it were full payment for so much heedlessness, (as we said before), you cannot help but feel a great impulse of love towards Him who is so good and merciful to you. The progress of your staff of hope will plainly show this to you in your time of prayer, if you do it properly as I told you. The spiritual proof of the genuineness of this impulse consists in a reverent affection that a person feels towards God in the time of prayer. It is caused by this fear as the basis of the work, and the impulse of love brought about by the progress of the staff of hope, because reverence is nothing else but fear and

love intermingled with the support of sure hope. I believe that the fruit of this experience is devotion; for devotion is nothing else, as the doctor St Thomas says, but a readiness of the will to do those things that belong to the service of God. Everyone knows that for himself, for if he serves God in this way, he experiences how readily his will inclines him to do it. I think that St Bernard agrees with this point when he says that all things should be done "swiftly and gladly", and here is why: swiftly for fear, and gladly for hope and loving trust in His mercy.

And what is more, I would rather have the reward of the one that persisted in this effort, though he never did physical penance in his life, (apart from what the Holy Church enjoins on us), than that of all the penitents that have ever lived from the beginning of the world right up till now, who were without it. I don't mean that simply thinking these thoughts is so meritorious, but the reverent affection which these two thoughts are the best means for us to bring about, that is as valuable as I claim. And this is just by itself, without any other sort of exercise, such as fasting, vigils, uncomfortable clothes, and all these other things! It is pleasing to God, and deserves some reward from Him, while it is impossible for a soul to have any reward from God without it.

The degree of reward will accord with the degree of this affection, for the one who has much of this will have a great reward, and the one who has less of this will have less reward. And just as all these other things, fasting, vigils, uncomfortable clothes and all the rest, are worthy, inasmuch as they encourage devotion, without it they are nothing. And, on the other hand, without them this devotion is sometimes entirely sufficient by itself, and often arises in many people, deservedly, without any of the other.

I say all this, so that by knowing it, you may choose and approve each thing according to its quality, giving more to the greater, and less to the less. Because often, ignorance is the cause of much error; ignorance makes people approve and attach more importance to exterior penances like fasting and vigils and physical discomfort and all the rest of it, than to spiritual exercises such as practising the virtues or this reverent affection mentioned before. And therefore, in discussing the value and the merit of this reverent affection, I shall say a little more than I have said, so that through such a discussion you may be a little more enlightened by this exercise than you are so far.

All this type of exercise that we have been discussing, when it has been previously stimulated by these two thoughts of fear and hope, may be likened to a tree full of fruit. Of this tree fear is that part beneath the earth, that is the root, while hope is that part which is above the earth - the trunk and the branches. In that our hope is certain and steadfast, it is the trunk; in that it stimulates us to deeds of love it is the branches, but this reverent affection is always the fruit. And then, as long as it is still attached to the tree, it has a certain green smell of the tree. But when it has been separated from the tree a short time and is fully ripe, it loses all the taste of the tree and becomes food fit for kings, whereas before it was only fit for peasants. It is at this time that reverent affection is as valuable as I claimed. And therefore get ready to pick this fruit from the tree, and offer it up by itself to the High King of Heaven. And then you shall be called God's own child, loving Him with a chaste love, for Himself, and not for His gifts.

This is what I mean: though all the innumerable good deeds which Almighty God has showed to each soul in this life are enough by themselves, and more than enough, to cause each soul to love Him with all its mind and understanding and will, yet if it were possible, (which it isn't), for a soul to be as powerful and as wise and as worthy as all the angels and saints in Heaven rolled into one, and if it hadn't been given all this goodness by God, and if God had never shown him any kindness in all its life, nevertheless, if this soul were to see the loveliness of God in Himself and the whole extent of it, it would be ravished out of its wits to love God until its heart burst, so lovely and loving, so good and so glorious as He is in Himself.

What a wonderful thing this is, and how noble a thing the love of God is to speak of! No human being could express perfectly the least part of it except by impossible analogies, for it completely transcends human understanding. And this is what I mean by 'loving Him with a chaste love, for Himself and not for His gifts': It is not as if I said (though it isn't a bad point to make), 'love Him much for His gifts, but immeasurably more for Himself'. In confiding my understanding of this reverent affection I shall speak more nobly and say that a soul which is touched in its

affections by a feeling of the presence of God as He is in Himself, and as He dwells in a perfect soul, and is illuminated in its understanding by the clear beam of everlasting light which is God, so that it sees and feels the loveliness of God Himself, has for that time, and for that moment, lost any memory of any good deed or any kindness that God ever did for it in this life; so that at that time it neither sees nor feels any reason to love God except for God's own sake.

So that it may be said, speaking of ordinary perfection, that the great goodness and the great kindness that God has shown us in this life, are noble and worthy reasons to love God. Yet with regard to the very point and summit of perfection towards which I propose to draw you by the content and the style of my writing, a perfect lover, for fear of hindering his perfection, seeks now (that is, at the peak of perfection), no other cause to love God but God Himself. So that in this context, I say that chaste love is to love God for Himself and not for his gifts.

And therefore, following the guidance of my analogy, busy yourself to pick the fruit off the tree and offer it to the king of Heaven, so that your love will be chaste. For while you offer Him this fruit in its green state and hanging on the tree, you may well be compared with a woman who is not chaste, for she loves a man more for his gifts than for himself. This is why I make the comparison: because it will seem that fear of imminent death and hope for forgiveness of all your waywardness makes you be so assiduous in serving God as you are. And, if it is so, then your fruit retains the immature smell of the tree, and although it does please God up to a point, nevertheless it does not satisfy him, and that is because your love is not chaste. Chaste love is when you ask God for neither release from pain, nor increase of reward, nor even to feel any joy in His love in this life - unless at particular times you long for comfort to refresh your spirit, for fear of falling by the way - but you ask nothing of God except Himself. And you neither care nor enquire whether you are in pain or bliss so long as you have Him whom you love. This is chaste love. This is perfect love.

And therefore get busy to pick the fruit off the tree, that is, to pick your reverent affection from out of the thoughts of fear and hope you have had previously, so you may offer it to God by itself, ripe and chaste, not motivated by the thought of anything less than Him, or anything in which He merely plays a part, no matter how important, but only by Him, by Himself.

Then it is as valuable as I say it is. For it is well known, without any uncertainty, to everyone that is experienced in theology and the knowledge of God's love, that whenever a person's attention is attracted towards God without 'means' - that is, without any intermediary of any thought motivating it - it deserves eternal life. And whenever a soul is so disposed - that is, when it offers the fruit ripe and off the tree, it may be raised to God suddenly and without exterior prompting, innumerable times in one hour. Therefore, it deserves more than I can say to be raised to joy by the grace of God which is the chief worker in this. So get busy to offer the fruit, ripe and off the tree.

Nevertheless, the fruit on the tree, continually offered as far as man's frailty will allow, does deserve salvation, but the fruit ripe and off the tree, spontaneously offered to God without prompting - that is perfection. So you may see that the tree is good, although I tell you to pick the fruit for greater perfection. Therefore plant it in your garden, for I would like you to gather its fruit and keep it for your Lord, and because I would like you to know what kind of activity knits human souls to God and makes them one with Him in love and in unity of will.

This is according to St Paul, who says "*Qui adheret Deo unus spiritus est cum illo,*" which is to say, whoever draws near to God (by such reverent affection as we mentioned before), is one spirit with God. That is to say, although God and the soul are two, and distinct by nature, yet by grace they are so knitted together that they are but a single spirit. And all this is the union of love and the harmony of will. This union is the marriage made between God and the soul, which will never be broken (although the passion and fervour of its working may cease for a time), except by mortal sin. In the spiritual feeling of this unity a soul may say, and even sing, if it wishes, the holy words written in the Song of Songs in the Bible: "*Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi*" by which we understand "My beloved will be joined unto me, and I unto Him" - by the spiritual glue of grace on His side, and by loving consent and gladness of spirit on yours.

And therefore climb up this tree, as I said in the beginning, and when you come to the fruit, that is, to the reverent affection, which will always be with you if think wholeheartedly about those

two other thoughts beforehand, and not deceive yourself with any lies, then you will take good heed of those impulses that are aroused in your soul at that time and get ready to humble yourself, as much as you are able with the help of grace, beneath the majesty of God, so that you may become accustomed to impulses arising by themselves without any premeditation.

I assure you that this is as valuable as I said. Always, the longer the fruit is kept from the tree - that is, from any ulterior consideration - and the oftener it happens spontaneously, willingly, joyfully, without prompting, the sweeter it smells, and the better it pleases the High King of Heaven. And whenever you feel sweetness and comfort in this experience, then it is as if He were to break the fruit and give you part of your own present. If you feel it so hard, painfully constraining your heart without any comfort at first, it is because the greenness of the fruit, still hanging on the tree, or newly pulled, sets your teeth on edge. Nevertheless, it is good for you, for you can't eat the sweet kernel if you don't first crack the hard shell or bite off the bitter rind. But if your teeth are too weak - that is, your spiritual strength - then try some trick to get round it, because good will is better than brute force.

There is another reason why I plant this tree in your garden for you to climb up. Because although it is possible for God to do as He likes, yet in my understanding, it is impossible for any human to arrive at the perfection of this work without these two methods, or two like them preparing the way. And yet the perfection of this work is spontaneous, without any methods. So therefore I advise you to take this, not as your own achievement, because that would be nothing but sin, but as something graciously given by God, and sent through me as a messenger, unworthy though I am. For you must know that every thought that prompts you to do good whether from within, via an angelic messenger, or from without, via a human messenger, is only an instrument of grace, given sent and chosen by God Himself to influence your soul.

And this is the reason why I advise you to choose these two thoughts before all others. For just as a human is a mixture of two natures, physical and spiritual, so it is necessary to have two separate methods to gain perfection (since it is true that these two natures will be united in immortality at the resurrection on the last day), so that each nature shall be raised to perfection in this life by a method suited to it. Fear is suited to our physical nature, hope to our spiritual; so it is all quite fitting and appropriate, I think. For there is nothing that will distract the body from earthly affections so soon as an experience of the fear of death, just as there is nothing that will incite the soul so soon or so fervently to a love for God, as a confident hope of forgiveness for all his sins. And therefore I have suggested climbing by these two thoughts.

But if it happens that your guardian angel, or any other person, enlightens your spiritual awareness, or any other two methods suit your temperament better than you think these will, then by all means take them up and leave off these without any blame to you. Nevertheless, in my opinion, as far as I understand it just now, I think these ought to be helpful, by what I know of you, and not too inappropriate to your temperament. Therefore, if you think they do you any good, then thank God wholeheartedly.

And for the love of God pray for me. Please do, for I am a pathetic creature, and you do not know what state I am in. Enough for now, but I wish you God's blessing and mine. Read this often, and don't forget, but try it out soon. Beware of all slackness, and all temptations to slackness, in the name of Jesus. Amen.