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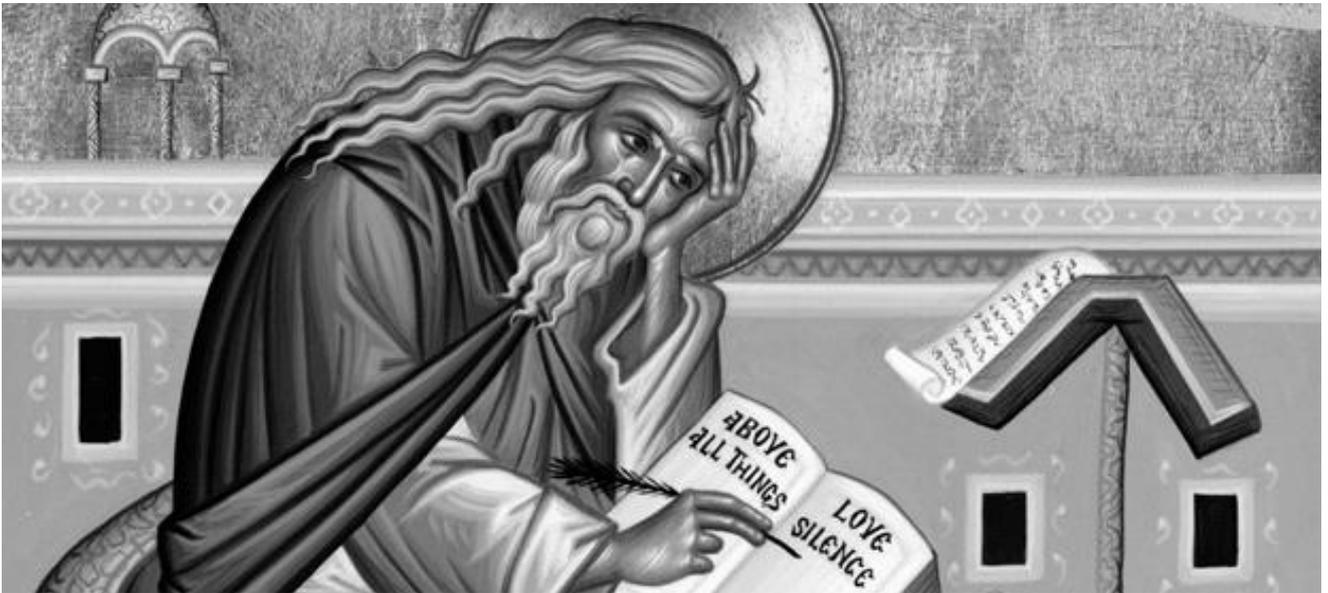


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# JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. 4

Sunday of Gregory Palamas



*“Pray without ceasing, give thanks at all times; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”*

*(1 Thess.5:17-18)*

## Deeper into Lent

The second Sunday in Lent is dedicated to **St. Gregory Palamas**, a 14<sup>th</sup> century monk of Mount Athos and later archbishop of Thessalonica. He is remembered during Lent because of his defence of a central part of Orthodox spirituality: contemplative prayer (or *hesychasm*). Some Greek monks living in Italy began putting extreme emphasis on the ‘unknowability’ of God, saying that the monks of Mt. Athos were wasting their time trying to get to know God in prayer and should instead be studying: the Bible, Greek philosophy, logic and so on.

St. Gregory argued that the experience of the prophets and the Apostles produced the deepest knowledge of God. Moreover, he stressed that all Christians can, and should, come to know God as directly as Abraham, Moses, and Christ’s disciples. The Bible is a *description* of divine revelation through history. We can *know* about God’s relationship with man by reading it, but we are called to *have* a relationship with God too. The experience of Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19) and the Apostles on Mount Tabor (Lk 9:28-36) is not just a one-off event to ‘inspire’ us: it is a deep relationship with God that is open to us all. How? For St Gregory and the monks of Mt Athos, such revelation from God is achieved by **unceasing prayer**.

## ‘Pray without ceasing’ | Making the impossible, possible

Saint Paul’s injunction to ‘pray without ceasing’ preoccupied Christians long before St Gregory. Many thought this was impossible, except maybe for monks, but this is to misunderstand prayer. St Gregory clearly said: *“Let no one think...it is the duty only of priests and monks to pray without ceasing... no – it is the duty of all of us Christians to remain always in prayer.”*

Prayer is a ‘state’ of being we are called to be ‘in’ at all times, regardless of what we are physically doing or where we are. This takes practice. It is done through the practice of **hesychasm**.

Hesychasm comes from the Greek word meaning ‘stillness, rest, silence’. It is based on Christ’s commandment: *‘when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray.’* (Matt 6:6). Christians understood this as an ‘internal’ shutting of the door to external thoughts and cares in order to enter into conversation with God without distraction. There are various ways that such ‘stillness’ can be achieved; one suitable method for Christians living in the world would be:

1. **Put aside time** – find time every day to practice silence. This is separate time from that used for daily prayers, though it can come immediately after (or before). When starting out, it doesn’t need to be long – perhaps 10 minutes; this can be extended with practice.
2. **Put aside space** – the silence of hesychasm should not be understood only literally, but when practicing stillness a suitably quiet place is still invaluable. Even Jesus retreated into the wilderness to pray on a regular basis. Our own ‘wilderness’ could be a spot in the country, the garden, tool-shed or spare room. The most important thing is that there are few distractions and that our wilderness can be returned to again and again.
3. **Put aside distractions** – the space we use should be as free of distractions as possible. Nighttime or early morning often have less audible & visual distractions. A darkened room with just a candle in front of an icon or completely closing the eyes can help too.
4. **Put aside thoughts** – with external silence and stillness achieved, see now how noisy our minds are! Thoughts, worries and memories will rise up quickly. Ignoring them is what brings true *hesychasm*. This seems impossible unless we have something to replace them.

The **Jesus Prayer** – *“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner”* (or similar) is the one ‘thought’ we can use to drive away all others.

Repeating the Jesus Prayer, verbally or silently, calls upon our Saviour to help us in our own feeble efforts. And it **is** a prayer – not a mantra – so we must pay attention to the words we are saying. We are **calling out to Jesus Christ**; we are **confessing Him to be our Lord and the Son of God**; we are **asking for mercy** and we are **admitting our faults** ('me a sinner'). To pay attention our posture can help: standing, kneeling, sitting up straight (not slouching or with feet up). Instead of planning to say the prayer a set number of times, say the prayer for a set number of minutes (use an alarm) so that we can say the prayer unhurriedly; not worrying about when to stop. Initially the Jesus Prayer will be a mental exercise. But if we combine our prayer with our breathing (inhaling: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God*; exhaling: *have mercy on me, a sinner*) then it starts to become a habit as natural as our breathing – a prayer of the heart. **Then**, with patience and God's help, we will be able to take the Jesus Prayer with us and internally pray in all places, in all our activities and **at all times**. *"And thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."* (Matt 6:6)

## The Love of the Martyrs

In the centuries before Gregory Palamas, the second Sunday of Lent remembered St. Polycarp (d.155AD) and all martyrs. Polycarp was a bishop who, aged 86, was executed for his Christian faith by being burned alive then stabbed. What are we to think of what the martyrs endured?



*“Martyrs of great love, pray to God for us... When your mortal brothers hear about your sufferings they consider them unbelievable and unbearable. For they can really imagine themselves only in your sufferings and not in your love: in the meaning of your sufferings. Oh, if they could only imagine themselves in your love also! All your sufferings would seem like nothing to them, just as they seemed to you. Just as the cold rain and the howling of the wind seem like nothing to a mother as she hurries home to her child... To one who has a goal greater than the world, the world can do nothing... Martyrs of great love, pray to God for us!”*

– St Nikolai Velimirovich (<http://www.sv-luka.org/praylake/pl37.htm>)

## The Eight Deadly Passions – Avarice (Greed)

The love of wealth would seem to be the least likely of passions for Christians to have: Jesus talks at length about the burden of material wealth, encouraged His disciples to give up worldly things and lived in poverty Himself. St. Paul even warns us that love of money is the ‘root of all kinds of evil’ (1 Tim 6:9-11)! Yet Jesus and the Saints dwell so much on fighting avarice precisely because we are so susceptible to it. At worst, because *‘where your treasure is, there your heart is also’* (Matt 6:21), acquiring wealth becomes an idol: something we devote ourselves to instead of God.

**Signs of avarice:** love of money, property or possessions; desire to become richer or imagining future wealth. Look out also for the more subtle signs: fear of old age, sudden poverty or sickness; preoccupation with current affairs. Leads to: miserliness, cruelty to the poor, envy, theft, usury, and forgetfulness or lack of faith in God’s providence. **Ultimately we can detect avarice not by how much we own but how we feel when we lose it:** *“Dispossession, then, reveals whether a man’s inner state is dispassionate or dominated by passion”* (Maximus the Confessor).

**How to combat avarice:** the mental health benefits of being charitable are recognized today. Making the giving of money, possessions and time to others a habit will reap extra benefits in seeing the true (un)importance of possessions. Read the Epistle of James and the lives of the Saints to see positive examples of non-acquisitiveness and that status is not linked to wealth. Don’t take out loans on unnecessary consumer goods. Sometimes memories of poverty or debt can lead to avarice later in life, through fear of living like that again; however I have seen others who went through extreme poverty and came out the least avaricious of all. At the time in desperation, they put their lot in with God and He delivered them so that afterwards they knew God would deal with their material needs. Whatever our history, we can all attain such faith through ‘unceasing prayer’, bringing us closer to God. Focusing our ‘acquisitiveness’ on Him alone, material things lose their attraction and avarice loses its power.

*“As we start upon the third week of the Fast, O faithful, let us glorify the Holy Trinity, and joyfully pass through the time that still remains. Causing passions of the flesh to wither from our souls, let us gather divine flowers, weaving garlands for the queen of days, that with crowns upon our heads we may sing in praise of Christ the Victor.”*