

## The Theology and Practice of the Jesus Prayer



Hendi

STT Soteria Purwokerto, Raya Barat Street, Baturraden, Purwokerto, Central Java  
e-mail: [hendi@sttsoteria.ac.id](mailto:hendi@sttsoteria.ac.id)

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### Abstract

*This article explains the theology and practice of the Jesus Prayer. Prayer, to the average person, is asking God for something. But the Jesus prayer is not this. It is an attempt to change the one who prays. This prayer is traditionally a monastic prayer. Its simplicity allows everyone to practice it. In this prayer, there is faith and hope in the goodness of Christ. It is the prayer from our whole being. It is a cry out of the deep heart and nepsis without ceasing. The unceasing repetition of the Jesus Prayer kept the mind on the thought of God and dispersed all irrelevant thoughts (logismoi). This is the prayer requires watchfulness as a lantern requires a candle. Watchfulness, mature in Christ, the fruit of Spirit, and theosis will follow in the praying unceasingly: the Jesus Prayer.*

*Keywords: Jesus prayer, nepsis, unceasingly, philokalia, have mercy.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

We all know that prayer is the most important thing in the spirituality especially in Christianity. Prayer is our true life, our highest task. Without prayer we are not genuinely human. We have been created to pray, just as we have been created to speak or to think. Yet how are we to pray? We can all of us commence with exterior prayer, with words of prayer recited from memory or repeated from books. But how are we to advance from this to living inner prayer? "Pray without ceasing," says St. Paul (1 Thess. 5:17). How shall we make prayer not just one activity among others but the activity of our entire life, a dimension present in everything that we undertake? How can prayer become part of our very self, not merely something that we do but something that we are? "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). Where do we begin, how do we embark on the journey inward?

To questions such as these many Eastern Church Fathers such as the Philokalia Fathers (the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the principal spiritual text has come to be the Philokalia, an anthology of older texts edited by Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain (1749–1809) and Makarios of Corinth (1731–1805) and published in 1782) in the present work an answer that may at first sight seem oversimplified but that is in fact profound and far-reaching. Begin the journey, they tell us, by practicing the Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Use this short invocation at home during your set periods of daily prayer. Use it in church at appropriate moments in the services. Use it also in a "free" manner, once or many times, throughout the day as you go about your customary tasks. It is a prayer for all seasons, a prayer that can be said by anyone, in any place and at any time. Yet, despite its straightforward character, it is a prayer that leads also to the deepest mysteries of contemplation and creative silence. As St. Ignatius Brianchaninov puts it, "Such is the property of the Prayer of Jesus—it leads its practice from earth to heaven, and places him among the celestial inhabitants." Calling it "the royal way" and the "narrow way," he states: "Do not think of it as a human institution; it is a divine institution."

Prayer, to the average person, is asking God for something. But the Jesus prayer is not this. It is an attempt to change the one who prays. St. John Chrysostom explains how this can happen: "I implore you, brethren, never to break or despise the rule of this prayer: A Christian when he eats, drinks, walks, sits, travels or does any other thing must continually cry: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me." So that the name of the Lord Jesus descending into the depths of the heart, should subdue the serpent ruling over the inner pastures and bring life and salvation to the soul. He should subdue the serpent ruling over the inner pastures and bring life and salvation to the soul. He should always live with the name of the Lord Jesus, so that the heart swallows the Lord and the Lord the heart, and the two become one. And again: do not estrange your heart from God, but abide in Him, and always guard your heart by remembering our Lord Jesus Christ, until the name of the Lord becomes rooted in the heart and it ceases to think anything else." Continue constantly in the name of the Lord Jesus that the heart may swallow the Lord and the Lord the heart, and these two may be one. However, this is not accomplished in a single day, nor in two days, but requires many years and much time. By constant, almost incessant repetition, we make the reality of mercy, both receiving it from God and passing it on to others, the foundation of our lives.

Anthony M. Coniaris writes that in time the prayer rises to consciousness without effort on our part. In the midst of trouble, temptation, pain, anger, or frustration, this prayer makes us aware of God's presence. As a result, we become prayer. We begin to worship and pray, not in our own words, nor in our own minds, but in the Spirit. Paul Evdokimov writes that it is not enough to say prayers; one must become, be prayer, prayer incarnate. It is not enough to have moments of praise. All of life, each act, every gesture, even the smile of the human face, must become a hymn of adoration, an offering, a prayer. One should offer not what one has, but what one is. That's why this prayer is very significant in spirituality. We should pray unceasingly. In this article, I will show that the theology and practice of the Jesus Prayer.

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## II. METHODE

The Jesus Prayer is a spiritual practice that is in line with the centrality of Christ. The brief prayer reads, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner (Κύριε Ιησού Χριστό, Υιός του Θεού, ἐλέησον μη τον αμαρτωλόν). A similar prayer to Jesus can be found in Luke 17:13; 18:38, Mark 10:47, and Matthew 20:31. The Jesus Prayer can be shortened in many ways. It can become seven words in English: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” or two words in Greek, Kyrie eleison, “Lord have mercy”, or “Lord Jesus” or simply “Jesus,” repeated prayerfully.

This prayer is traditionally a monastic prayer. During the rite of monastic profession, the future monk or nun is given a rosary or prayer-rope, to be used when invoking the Holy Name, and in this way the Jesus Prayer may be seen as part of the monastic vow. But Brianchaninov insists that the Jesus Prayer is suitable for “all the people of God without exception whether monks or lay people. Its simplicity allows everyone to practice it. In this prayer, there is faith and hope in the goodness of Christ. In praying this simple prayer, we pursue an undivided attention to love Christ, which can translate to loving our neighbors.

Archimandrite Zacharias explains that there are two main parts of the Jesus Prayer. The first part of the prayer, “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God”, contains a confession of faith in the divinity of Christ, but also in all the Holy Trinity. Kallistos Ware explains that the Jesus Prayer is not only Christ-centered but Trinitarian. This is, in outward form, a prayer to the second person of the Trinity, the Lord Jesus Christ. But the other two persons are also present, although they are not named. For, by speaking of Jesus as ‘Son of God’, we point towards his Father; and the Spirit is also embraced in our prayer, since ‘no one can say “Lord Jesus”, except in the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12:3).

The Name of Jesus was given by revelation from Above. It originates from the energy of the divine Being, out of time, and it is not at all a human device. This revelation is an action of the divinity, and confers universal glory on the Name, which is ontologically linked with Christ, the Person who is named. Coniaris writes that the power of the Jesus Prayer lies in the name, “Jesus”, the name that is above every name. Devils are cast out and people are healed through the Name of Jesus, for the Name is power. Jesus Himself said, “Whatever you shall ask the Father in My Name, he will give it to you” (John 16:23). “Flog your enemies with the Name of Jesus,” urges St. John Climacus, “for there is no weapon more powerful in heaven...or on earth...” St. Theophan the Recluse wrote, “The Jesus Prayer is like any other prayer. It is stronger than all other prayers only in virtue of the all-powerful Name of Jesus, Our Lord and Savior. But it is necessary to invoke His Name with a full and unwavering faith—with a deep certainty that He is near, sees and hears, pays whole-hearted attention to our petition, and is ready to fulfill it and to grant what we seek.” The Name of Jesus Christ becomes the means and “place” for the union of the believer with God-the-Saviour. When this Name is invoked, in a manner which is fitting to God, it brings with it the goodwill of the Holy Spirit, and man lives forever before the Face of the Lord.

In the second part, “have mercy on me, a sinner,” there is a confession made by the one praying. He acknowledges his fall, both universal and personal, his sinfulness and the need for salvation. St. Symeon of Thessaloniki writes about the Kyrie Eleison (Κύριε ἐλέησον) prayer: “‘Have mercy upon us, O God, according to your great mercy, we beseech you...’ This expression is appropriate, since we should not ask for anything except for mercy, as we have neither boldness nor access to offer anything as our own... So as sinners and condemned through sin we cannot, nor dare not, say anything to our Loving Master except ‘have mercy.’”

The word mercy in English is the translation of the Greek word *eleos*. This word has the same ultimate root as the old Greek word *elaion* for oil, or more precisely, olive oil; a substance which was used extensively as a soothing agent for bruises and minor wounds. The oil was poured onto the wound and gently massaged in, thus soothing, comforting and making the whole injured part. The oil was also used in feeding or making food, shedding the light, and anointing. The four uses of the Jesus Prayer are Lord, feed me; enlighten me; bless me; and heal me.

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The Hebrew word which is also translated as *eleos* and *mercy* is *hesed*, and means steadfast love. The Greek words for “Lord have mercy”, are “*Kyrie eleison*”—that is to say, “Lord, soothe me, comfort me, take away my pain, show me your steadfast love.” Thus, the mercy does not refer so much to justice or acquittal—a very Western interpretation—but to the infinite loving-kindness of God, and his compassion for his suffering children! It is in this sense that we pray “Lord, have mercy,” with great frequency throughout the Divine Liturgy.

These two parts of the prayer, the confession of faith and the repentance of the one praying, give fullness and content to the prayer. Ware explains that the Jesus Prayer, then, indicates both man’s problem and God’s solution. Jesus is the Savior, the anointed king, the one who has mercy. But the Prayer also tells us something more about the person of Jesus himself. He is addressed as ‘Lord’ and ‘Son of God’; here the Prayer speaks of his Godhead, of his transcendence and eternity. But he is addressed equally as ‘Jesus’, that is, by the personal name which his mother and his foster-father gave him after his human birth Bethlehem. So, the Prayer speaks also of his manhood, of the genuine reality of his birth as a human being.

Coniaris quotes St. Theophan the Recluse describing about the degrees of prayer. First, he says, there is bodily prayer, prayer with the lips, consisting of reading, standing, making prostrations, etc. The second degree is prayer with attention when the mind has learned to focus completely on the words being prayed or read. The third degree is prayer of feeling when the heart now begins to be warmed by the thoughts that existed formerly in the mind. The mind has now descended into the heart. Thought and feeling are now wedded. When the prayer of feeling becomes continuous, then, says St. Theophan, spiritual prayer has begun. This is the last stage of prayer where the Holy Spirit prays in us and for us.

Although the Jesus Prayer consists only of one sentence, Brianchaninov, like St. Theophan, explains that there are three levels of the Jesus Prayer. There is a progression happening when we practice the prayer:

1. Prayer of the Lips. One can start with invoking the name of Jesus vocally or by simply moving the lips to say this prayer. This stage is also called the outer prayer.
2. Prayer of the Mind. The outer prayer alone is not enough. One must focus his or her mind on the meaning of the words in the prayer, and ultimately on Jesus himself. St. Gregory of Sinai suggests that the prayer of the lips and the prayer of the mind be used alternately to avoid tiredness.
3. Prayer of the Heart. We finally enter into the inner closet of the heart, praying with our entire being. ‘But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’ (Matthew 6:6)

True prayer proceeds not only from the mouth but more especially from the heart, that is, from our whole being. It is a cry out of the deep. St. John Chrysostom: By prayer, I understand not that which is found only in the mouth, but that which springs from the bottom of the heart. Indeed, just as trees with the deepest roots are not broken or uprooted by a violent storm... So too, prayers that come from the depth of the heart, rooted there, ascend to heaven with confidence. They are not turned aside under attack from any distracting thought at all. This is why the psalm says, “Out of the depths I have cried to you, O Lord” (Psalm 129:1).

The Fathers of the Philokalia emphasize the importance of unceasing prayer. Peter of Damascus says: The Apostle says, “Pray without ceasing.” That is, he teaches men to have the remembrance of God in all times and places and circumstances. If you are making something, you must call to mind the Creator of all things; if you see the light, remember the Giver of it.

...If you put on your clothes, recall Whose gift they are and thank Him Who provides for your life. In short, let every action be a cause of your remembering and praising God, and you will be praying without ceasing and therein your soul will always rejoice. Evagrius of Pontus says: Prayer is an ascent of the mind to God. If you love God, you converse with him continually as you would with your father, banishing every passion from your mind. The unceasing repetition of the Jesus Prayer kept the mind on the thought of God and dispersed

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all irrelevant thoughts (logismoi). Unceasing prayer is the way of attentiveness or nepsis to guard our nous or intellect and control logismoi.

St. Hesychios the Priest said that attentiveness is the heart's stillness, unbroken by any thought. In this stillness the heart breathes and invokes, endlessly and without ceasing, only Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and himself God. It confesses him who alone has power to forgive our sins, and with his aid it courageously faces its enemies. Through this invocation enfolded continually in Christ, who secretly divines all hearts, the soul does everything it can to keep its sweetness and its inner struggle hidden from men, so that the devil, coming upon it surreptitiously, does not lead it into evil and destroy its precious work.

St. Hesychios is concerned that praying and nepsis is an integral part. Watchfulness and the Jesus Prayer, mutually reinforce one another; for close attentiveness goes with constant prayer, while prayer goes with close watchfulness and attentiveness of intellect. Whenever we are filled with evil thoughts, we should throw the invocation of our Lord Jesus Christ into their midst. Then, as experience has taught us, we shall see them instantly dispersed like smoke in the air. Once the intellect is left to itself again, we can renew our constant attentiveness and our invocation. Whenever we are distracted, we should act in this way.

Nepsis, is achieved by guarding closely the senses and especially by the Jesus Prayer. Coniaris explains that in fact, the Church Fathers often quoted one sentence of Evagrius because it contained a suggestive alliteration of two Greek words *proseuche* (prayer) and *prosoche* (attention). Attentiveness and prayer belong together. No one can be truly attentive without the power that comes from prayer. To be successful, a person's efforts to be vigilant must be buttressed by God's power. In fact, it has been said that *prosoche* (attention) is the mother of *proseuche* (prayer). "Watch and pray," said Jesus, "that you enter not into temptation..." Watchfulness and prayer are inseparable in the unseen warfare with the unclean thoughts and demons like St. Hesychios states that forgetfulness can extinguish our guard over our intellect as water extinguishes fire; but the continuous repetition of the Jesus Prayer, combined with strict watchfulness, uproots it from our heart. The Jesus Prayer requires watchfulness as a lantern requires a candle.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The invocation of the name of Jesus in the Jesus Prayer could use of image in prayer such as an icon. Before the icon we can make stability of our nous. One possible reason is to say that with the use of icons, our thoughts can easily focus on the images that are present visually. This is not the case with mental images, which we cannot hold on tightly unless we are an experienced prayer. Our thoughts can easily wander and other unwanted images may appear and overtake our prayer. And by using the icon we can make a directness. St. Theophan the Recluse sees that images as intermediates between us and Jesus. If we want to connect with Jesus directly, we need to strip all images. The same is true with words, because words are symbols just like images. Words are not necessary in prayer, but they are only instruments to help us 'stand before the Lord with the mind in the heart.' Evagrius of Pontus insists that we need to approach the Immaterial immaterially to come to understanding. This simply means that we stand before Christ with our whole being in humility.

Emil Salim describes the three major benefits from praying the Jesus Prayer regularly:

1. Watchfulness. In a life full of trials, the Jesus Prayer helps us to be aware of the constant spiritual warfare we are facing and to renounce sinful desires and passions. St. Philotheos of Sinai writes that smoke from wood kindling a fire troubles the eyes; but then the fire gives them light and gladdens them. Similarly, unceasing attentiveness is irksome; but when, invoked in prayer, Jesus draws near, he illumines the heart; for remembrance of him confers on us spiritual enlightenment and the highest of all blessings.
2. Mature in Christ. The constant invocation of Jesus' name keeps our spirit burning for the love of Christ. The fruits of the Spirit such as love, joy, and peace, and faithfulness will follow.

3. Theosis. The Jesus Prayer helps us assimilate the presence of God in our life. Theosis cannot happen without prayer. The Church Fathers say about prayer: "The power of prayer fulfills (completes) the sacrament of our union with God... Prayer uplifts and unites human beings with God" (St. Gregory Palamas). "The effect of prayer is union with God" (St. Gregory of Nyssa). "Sacred prayer, and it alone...joins God with man, and makes the two one spirit." Jesus came to earth to tell us: You give me your time, and I will give you my eternity. You give me your weary body, and I will give you my rest. You give me your sins, and I will give you my forgiveness. You give me your broken heart, and I will give you my healing. You give me your emptiness, and I will give you my fullness. You give me your humanity, and I will give you my divinity.

Salim gives several practical matters considering the Jesus Prayer. First, frequency. St. Paul invites us to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). The Jesus Prayer can be used to do this. One famous story of the Jesus Prayer tells of a pilgrim being told to pray up to 12,000 times a day. Nevertheless, counting is not really important. What is important is humility, constancy, and the grace of Christ. Second, time and place. One can have a formal time doing the Jesus Prayer, with a religious gesture such as prostration. However, one can pray this prayer anytime and anywhere, even during a conversation with another person! Third, prayer rope. The prayer rope is useful for staying focus and for reminding us to pray. Fourth, Breathing. There is a lot of debate about whether the Jesus Prayer must be accompanied by a breathing rhythm following the words. One crucial point is that rhythmic breathing is not necessary for the Jesus Prayer. Some people find rhythmic breathing helpful while praying the Jesus Prayer, especially to focus on praying and to calm down. If wanted, one can simply inhale while saying 'Lord Jesus' and exhale while saying 'have mercy on me!' St. Gregory of Sinai advises us that some fathers teach that the prayer should be said aloud; others that it should be said silently with the intellect. On the basis of my personal experience, I recommend both ways. For at times the intellect grows listless and cannot repeat the prayer, while at other times the same thing happens to the voice. Thus, we should pray both vocally and in the intellect. But when we pray vocally, we should speak quietly and calmly and not loudly, so that the voice does not disturb and hinder the intellect's consciousness and concentration. This is always a danger until the intellect grows accustomed to its work, makes progress, and receives power from the Spirit to pray firmly and with complete attention. Then there will be no need to pray aloud—indeed, it will be impossible, for we shall be content to carry out the whole work with the intellect alone.

Salim states that there are some worries that should also be considered. First, talisman. Is the Jesus Prayer a mantra? It is not, because it doesn't have power in itself apart from the union with Christ. Second, mechanical repetition. Is repetition meaningless? Not necessarily. There is always the danger of empty religiosity, but the Jesus Prayer can be done always with reverence, faith, and love.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The Jesus Prayer is prayer of faith and hope in the goodness of Christ. We adore God's glory, acclaiming Jesus as the Lord of all creation and the eternal Son. Then at its conclusion the Prayer turns to our condition as sinners - sinful by virtue of the fall, sinful through our personal acts of wrongdoing. We can experience the benefit of the Jesus Prayer by practicing this prayer incessantly, watchfulness, and following the practical matters above.

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