

The Centrality of Prayer Part 6

Canonical Prayer as Biblical Meditation

To speak about the “centrality of prayer” is to speak simultaneously of the importance of the Bible in the Christian life. The Scriptures enjoin us to pray: “Rejoice always, *pray without ceasing*, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:16-18). Also, in Scripture we are taught how and what to pray, for example in Mathew 6:5-15 and the Book of Psalms.

We know how natural it seems to cry out to God when we are going through a difficulty in life. We might simply cry out, “God help me!” This is personal/individual prayer, a calling out to God who is our Helper and Savior. This is quite direct and natural. There is a “higher” - and in the long term more satisfying - form of prayer, which is Canonical Prayer (See part 5). We can, while keeping Canonical Prayer, in mind, begin to talk about an important corollary, which is Biblical Meditation. For example, when one recites the Lord’s prayer audibly, one is practicing Biblical Meditation. It is Biblical because the Lord’s Prayer comes from the text of Matthew’s Gospel, i.e. the Bible, and audible recitation, which is Biblical meditation, is taught in Psalm 1:2, which of course is in the Bible.

This meditation/audible recitation of God’s Law/Teaching, which is the expression of God’s wisdom, not only gives us the proper words but also teaches and challenges us to think and act differently in our lives. Remember that judgment is based on how we love God and our neighbor. This love can be taught. This love is not a sentimental kind of love. Biblically speaking, love is a covenant word as well as a wisdom word. God loves us and he expects us to love him and our fellow creatures and in doing so we are living in a way that corresponds with how things ought to be, and this is wisdom. A covenant is an agreement between two parties. The Scriptural covenant is an agreement with two unequal parties. God is the Master and we are his servants. He gives us his will in the divine Scriptures. As we recite them to God, we are at the same time going to His School of wisdom to learn how to think and act.

I would like to point out here that the Bible is not a rule book that gives us all the answers to our questions. Its function is to challenge us to think and act differently. If one has read the Bible from cover to cover one time one knows that the questions that arise are many. The Bible is not a checklist of dos and don’ts but a text to be studied and wrestled with. It is like wrestling with an Angel as the Patriarch Jacob did, who after the match was over was given a new name by the Angel: “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed” (Genesis 32:28). The Bible does not yield its bounty easily. Any skill worth having takes some work, so why would the religious life be any different? Biblical Wisdom does not come all at once but through experience. One must be patient with Scripture; it takes time.

There is no better time than now to renew our commitment to reading the Bible or to begin this venerable Orthodox Tradition. If one were to go to the Icon of St. John Chrysostom that is on the South wall at St. Andrew’s Church in Lewes, DE, one would find the following words of St. John: “*I also always entreat you ... to persevere continually in reading the divine Scriptures.*”

A wonderful benefit we have in our world today is access to recordings of the Bible. Getting a recording of the Bible and listening to it regularly while doing chores around the house is a good way to expose oneself to the Sacred text. It is easier today than it has ever been to become familiar with the Bible. One could purchase, for example, the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible with the Apocrypha on one’s cell phone. There are free audio versions of this as well. If another good version is already in your possession, that is wonderful! We can read Scripture aloud or have it read to us by someone else. The word translated “meditates” in Psalm 1 means “recite” and hearing is believing.