

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH  
OCTOBER 16, 2022**

**LUKE 8: 5-15**

**“PRAYER: MOISTURE FOR OUR DRY SOULS”**

Back in the early 1800's a pioneer had decided which plot of land in Ohio he wished to settle in. It was a wooded area, so he had lots of tree chopping to do. The trees weren't huge and he figured he could handle it himself with his axe. So he started in----the first day he managed to chop down 25 of the small trees. The second day, his number dropped to 20. The third day, he could only get 15 down---and he wondered why? He still felt strong but he was slowing way down. A neighbor came by and the pioneer mentioned the problem to him. The neighbor said, "Let me look at your axe." He looked at it and said, "Have you been forgetting to sharpen your axe? It's quite dull and that's why you are slowing down. You have to sharpen it often for it to work well." And so the first man remembered from then on to sharpen the axe and regained his speed at chopping. (Father Anthony Coniaris, Preaching the Word of God, Light & Life Press, p. 66)

Is your spiritual life dragging? Is it harder and harder for you to chop down the trees of sin in your life? Getting distant from God? Perhaps your spiritual axe needs sharpening. A good way to sharpen your spiritual axe is to pray more..... *Now a brief detour to our gospel reading and then back to prayer.....*

Today's gospel lesson from Luke 8 contains one of our Lord Jesus Christ's most complicated parables---the story of the sower and the seeds. It's about a farmer sowing seeds on four different types of soil. We will just look at soil type #2 today. In verse 6, the farmer plants seed in soil that is rocky and dry--not a good move! And in verse 13, we see that, although the seeds do germinate and the plants grow a little, they can't last long in that dry and rocky dirt. They soon fade away and die.

We and our souls can be like those seeds. Our souls get dry and hard and then we don't grow well in our walk with Christ. We start to dry up and wither away..... *Now end of detour and back to where we started: prayer...*

Lack of enough prayer can be a big cause of spiritual dryness. Not praying much makes us like a seed not growing well in dry and rocky soil. Praying a

lot, on the other hand, brings spiritual moisture to our dry souls.

There are different types of prayer: here at church, our own personal prayers, praying in our own words, praying with a prayer book, prayer at a set aside time of day, prayer at meals, etc. All good!

Today's focus will be on a type of prayer especially good to keep us from drying up-----ongoing prayer throughout the day. Praying here, there, everywhere. Praying now, praying later, praying all the time. St. Paul urges to this in I Thessalonians 5: 17 where he writes—"Pray without stopping." Pray all the time!

Impossible? Well, there are some who have at least come very close to actually obeying Paul's words---- It is really possible to communicate almost non-stop.....think about how much some people text. Have you ever been in a restaurant and noticed a couple sitting with one another at the same table? They don't talk to each other.....they both are texting with other people, almost non-stop! So if one can text constantly, one can pray constantly!

There is a great spiritual tool in our Orthodox Tradition to help us move towards what St. Paul urges---to pray all the time. It goes back many, many centuries to the early ages of Christianity. It is called the Jesus Prayer. This is how it goes—"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." Short! And sometimes people even pray it in a little shorter version.

It's great for praying during the day; it's great for bringing spiritual moisture to our souls.

Three advantages that it has:

1. Short and simple----you can pray it in a few seconds.
2. It contains the whole Christian message in a nutshell----"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." That pretty much says it all!
3. It is focused on the powerful name of Jesus—many think that fact is why it became the most prominent of the many ancient forms of short prayer. In this little prayer, we speak the powerful name of Jesus, calling on Him over and over..... It is a powerful prayer to our all-powerful Jesus Christ!

If we pray it a lot with good attention and in repentance, it will bring moisture for our dry souls so that our spiritual seeds will thrive. It helps us defeat temptations. St. Gregory of Sinai, about 1500 years ago, said this about this prayer----"Invoke the Lord Jesus continually and diligently and you will swiftly subdue evil thoughts." (Philokalia, Vol. 4, p. 264)

It's not easy. It takes much determination, focus, and discipline. But it's well worth it because it will bring you closer to Christ, it will put moisture into your dry soul, and it will bring you some spiritual quietness. And when you have a degree of

spiritual quietness you will be better able to hear God guiding you.

In New Zealand there is a group of caves called the Waitomo Caves. One chamber contains an underground lake with a high domed roof over it. On that roof live thousands and thousands of glow worms. They will only light up when there is complete silence in the cave. Any sound and their lights shut off.

There are boat tours on that lake. As they start off, the tour guide tells the tourists that the worms will only light if the tourists become 100% silent. No using phones, no crying babies, no coughing, no whispering, no nothing! Once he gets them to all agree to total silence, and once it really occurs, then all lights are turned off. Now there is total darkness and total silence. Quite soon, the thousands of glow worms all start to shine and the cave is bathed in beauty! ("The Upper Room", 5/22/80)

If we pray a lot, with quite hearts and minds, God's light will shine more brightly on us. But if our minds and hearts are constantly busy and noisy, how can God get through?

So try the Jesus Prayer----start by setting aside just a few minutes each day to pray it as intently as possible. Maybe start with 5 minutes, maybe even less. Because you will find it very difficult to really concentrate on it even for just a few minutes! Gradually, the time you give to it can increase.

And try also praying it "on the run"---pray while you do other things that perhaps don't require total attention. Maybe while walking the dog, while washing the dishes, while raking the leaves, going across the office to the water fountain, standing in line at a store, being on hold on the phone, etc.....

No matter how you try it, it will be hard and often frustrating. Your mind will wander, distractions will pop up. That's normal. Just persist, persist, persist. For your whole life! And even if you don't ever get close to praying all the time at least you will be praying a lot more----and that's a good thing!

***A caution***---the Jesus Prayer is not magic. It's not a charm. It's not a mantra like some religions have. And it's not enough! There are more important things than some particular prayer----such things as worshipping God in the liturgy and as participating in the Holy Sacraments! *And true repentance for our sins.*

Repentance means to stop sinning. If we are not repentant, if we are content to just continue sinning, then the Jesus Prayer will not bring us closer to God. St. Evagrius of Pontus said, "A man in chains cannot run; in the same way, if you are in the chains of sin, you cannot progress in prayer." (quoted in Love's Immensity, Scott Cairns, Paraclete Press, 2007, p. 55)

Are you caught in some chains of sin? Then you need to repent, to go to Confession, to actually change and quit those sins dragging you down. And then

prayer can really start to work in your life.

God will help you! God will bless you! Pray and repent and get some moisture into your dry soul.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.