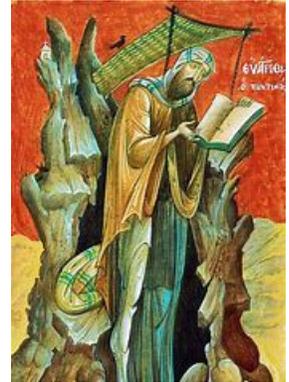


Week 9: Evagrius/Lord's Prayer

"He who carries God in his heart bears Heaven with him wherever he goes." – St. Ignatius of Loyola

Evagrius Ponticus

- b. 346-d.399, Evagrius Ponticus was a renowned theological consultant and preacher in Constantinople until he went through a personal spiritual crisis which prompted him to move to Jerusalem where he became a monk.
- Evagrius attended the Second Ecumenical Council where the third section of the Creed (the part pertaining to the Holy Spirit) was formulated.
- He withdrew to the Egyptian desert where he spent the rest of his life developing and practicing his mystical theology which became formative in the contemplative practices as they developed in both the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Roman Catholic) churches.
- Because the Western church deemed some of his theology heretical in 533, his ideas about mysticism survive through other theologians and mystics influenced by Evagrius such as his disciple, St. John Cassian, who is accredited to have had a profound effect on the spirituality of the Benedictine Order.
- Essentially, Evagrius wrote that the one essential function of a spiritual being is to find and experience unity with God. That can only be done when worldly concerns lose their gravity and no longer have a hold on your life. Humans deeply desire divine simplicity.
- The theological philosophy of Evagrius' time dictated a three-step path to mysticism: purgation, illumination, unity. Unlike this progression, which started with knowledge and worked toward the cosmos, Evagrius' doctrine turned that around, saying that knowledge came from asceticism. In other words, God illuminates Himself within us, and from that knowledge comes spiritual doctrine.
- Evagrius taught that we can all strive for "solitude of the spirit" and in that way the intellect and the heart (the *nous*) can be "inner monks".
- Through Evagrius, we find some of our oldest writings which constitute the roots of the Enneagram, a system of exploring one's own psyche and humanity as being intrinsically linked to the Divine and to each other. The *Praktikos* explores different aspects of humanity that might separate us from knowing the Divine more completely. *"There are eight general and basic categories of thoughts in which are included every thought. First is that of gluttony, then impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and last of all pride. It is not in our power to determine whether or not we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions."* (*Praktikos 6*)
- One of the writings of Evagrius is his *Chapters on Prayer*. Throughout these chapters, he refers often to the *nous* which can be translated as the *intellect*. The true meaning of the word does not refer to what one knows, but to what one perceives to be absolutely true. It contains the blessings of the spiritual gift of knowing and is equally connected to the head and the heart. Because of this, it is helpful to read these 153 Chapters on Prayer from a place of prayer, hearing the words with the heart. Evagrius says in the Prologue to the chapters, *"Since everything is twofold, each facing the other as the wise Jesus says (Sir. 42:24), receive these chapters both in letter; and in spirit. But understand that nous takes complete precedence over the letter, since without [nous] there can be no letter. In the same way prayer also has a twofold mode: one active; the other contemplative. And it is the same with numbers: on the surface there is quantity; while the inner significance is quality."*



- Since most of what is known of the life of Evagrius comes from the content and quality of his writings, several quotes of Evagrius follow:
 - *Prayer is a continual intercourse with the Spirit of God. What state of soul then is required that the spirit might thus strain after its Master without wavering, living constantly with him without intermediary? (Chapters on Prayer, Chapter 3)*
 - *“Leave your gift before the altar, and first go away and be reconciled to your brother,” (Mt 5:24) and after that you will be able to pray without disturbance. For memory of injury blinds the mind (hegemonikon) of one who prays, and casts a cloud over his prayers. (CoP, 21)*
 - *Do not pray that what you will should be done, because your [will] is not in full harmony with the will of God. Pray instead as you were taught, saying, Let your will be done in me (Mt 6:10, 24:2). And in all matters ask of him in this way that his will be done. He wills [only] what is good and profitable for the soul; but that is not always what you seek. I have often prayed, requesting that something I thought was good for me be done for me, insisting on my request, and irrationally [attempting to] force God’s will. And [thus] I did not leave it to him who knows what is profitable to arrange (1Cor 10:23). And when I eventually received what I asked for, I was very sorry I had asked for my own choice; for the matter did not turn out as I had imagined. (CoP, 31-32)*
 - *If you long to pray then avoid all that is opposed to prayer. Then when God draws near, He has only to go along with you. (CoP, 65)*
 - *You will not be able to pray purely if you are all involved with material affairs and agitated with unremitting concerns. For prayer is the rejection of concepts. (CoP, 70)*
 - *If you want to pray in spirit, do not hate anyone, then you will not have a cloud obstructing you in the time of prayer. (CoP, 128)*
 - *Agape is the progeny of apatheia. Apatheia is the very flower of asceticism. Asceticism consists in keeping the commandments. The custodian of these commandments is the fear of God which is in turn the offspring of true faith. Now faith is an interior good, one which is to be found even in those who do not yet believe in God. (Praktikos, 81)*

Reflection Questions:

St. Ignatius says that when we discover something that is standing between ourselves and God there are three possible responses. We might try very hard to change that thing, we might rationalize why that thing is not so bad, or we might try not to keep it or to rid ourselves of it, but to see how God is working in and around it. Can you think of some thing or habit in your life that keeps you from drawing closer to God? What has been your response? What prayer might God be working in and around this thing?

What are you asking for when you pray, “Give us this day our daily bread?” Do you have a sense of how God might define your “daily bread”?

If you were to write some chapters on prayer, what would you include as some qualities of prayer? As you walk through your life this week, see if you notice invitations to write more chapters on prayer. Are there things that you regularly do that could be more prayerful?