# Spiritual Canon

- Into the Deep Podcast - Fr Theodore Ghaly | Ep 12 | Prayer
- What is a Spiritual Canon? - HEMY

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**The Disciples and Prayer**

When the disciples asked the Lord, they didn't ask "how should we conduct ourselves" or "what should we do" but they asked Him "teach us to pray." And He answered

Prayer is the driving force behind everything the apostles do in the Book of Acts. Everything they do is surrounded by prayer.

"These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication" (Acts 1:14)

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." (Acts 2:42)

- The roles of the Church are the Eucharist and prayers
- The disciples ordained deacons in order to give themselves "continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word"

The disciples also learned from the Lord Jesus Christ

- Christ would take time to go in solitude and pray
- First thing that gets excluded when/if I'm busy is prayer. But for the disciples and the Lord, they set apart time for prayer

Why don't I feel the presence of God? Why don't I feel powerful or able to overcome temptation? Why don't I feel like God is standing with me? Prayer is that bond with God that strengthens us.

**Is Prayer Supposed to be Difficult? Constantly Fighting? Or are we not understanding the point of prayer?**

Prayer can be difficult at time... "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" - in my spirit I know that I should pray, but I have other things pulling me in other directions (my flesh - tired, hungry, etc.; my responsibilities and priorities).

***The devil fights prayer more than anything else... if a person has a strong prayer life, they cannot be touched by the devil.***

When we pray the Agpeya together in the liturgy, or if we're on a retreat and we pray the hours, or in the monastery or convent, no one complains about prayer. But when I'm on my own... I'm on my own. No one sees what I'm doing. They say "character" is what you do when no one is watching. There's no accountability.

When I remove my time from a life of prayer, and from connection with God, there is deterioration over time.

Compare it with going to the gym... you see yourself every day and don't notice the small changes. But if someone sees you after it has been a while, they notice the change.

**When can you pray?**

Disciples taught that there is a structure and a time for prayer - "Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour." (Acts 3:1)

Spontaneous prayer is good too

I can have discipline in prayer but more important is understanding that prayer is about being constantly connected with God.

St Paul says "Pray without ceasing"

- What does it mean? Does it mean to always be "saying words" (out loud or in your mind?)
- Prayer is connection and communication with God - be connected and communicating with God constantly
- Imagine someone who has a nagging cough - he always has that tickle in his throat, never forgets that he has it, but he's not ALWAYS coughing
- What about when you sleep?
- Someone who I talk to constantly, or daily. You're texting your friends, then a little while later they text you back. Then you text them again... you would say "we talked all day" - you didn't talk every second of the day, but you were in constant communication with God.

**What is prayer?**

- Prayer is not just asking God - sometimes I only pray when I need something
- The Church emphasizes a particular type of prayer which is PRAISE
  - Praising God for WHO HE IS because HE IS deserving or praise
- Petitions for others
- Supplications for myself
- Asking for forgiveness
- The Church gives us the structured prayer to teach us how to pray in order to develop our unstructured prayer
  - Agpeya sometimes feels boring
  - Agpeya is mostly the psalms which are prayers inspired by the Holy Spirit

    - Maybe I'm not in the mood to give thanks today, but when I pray the Agpeya, it reminds me to be thankful today. Gives me perspective
    - Maybe it escapes me in a moment that God is deserving of praise. But when I sing the Tasbeha or say "Doxa Patri" in Agpeya, I remember
    - Sometimes we say "I don't know what to say to God" or "I draw a blank" or "I always say the same thing"
    - Structured prayer produces in you fruitful unstructured prayer
- Stop thinking of prayer as "an obligation I have in front of God to appease Him" - this skews our understanding of prayer
    - If you miss liturgy or you miss a morning prayer, what is the feeling I ought to feel? Many people would say guilt
    - A more mature feeling is that I missed out on something... imagine we are planning to meet up for coffee and I get stuck in traffic and I'm not able to make it so I call and tell you I can't make it. My feeling is that I missed out on something I was excited for. I'm looking forward to the next time I can reschedule with him

**Explanation of the Hours of the Agpeya**

- The hours are based on the Jewish form of prayer
    - 1st Hour - 6am
    - 3rd Hour - 9am
    - 6th Hour - 12pm
    - 9th Hour - 3pm
    - 11th Hour - 5pm
    - 12th Hour - 6pm
- In Liturgy we pray 3rd Hour because it's that time, and the 6th Hour because we'll probably miss it in the course of the Liturgy
- When you wake up in the morning, it's good to pray the 1st Hour because the prayers are focusing on and surrounding the beginning of the day, and the rising out of bed
- Each hour has introduction, Thanksgiving Prayer, Psalm 50, then 12 Psalms (19 in the first hour), Gospel, Litanies, Absolution and Conclusion
- Prayer before Communion, Prayer before Confession, Prayer before Eating, Prayer before an Exam, etc.

**What advice would you give someone who feels like his relationship with God is drifting?**

- Prayer is the solution to this
- Maybe there are sins in my life I need to stop, or vices I need to remove, or people I need to distance from... but the  journey of our spiritual life is to know God more and love Him more, grow closer to Him, and sin becomes to me unappealing in comparison to the beauty of Christ.
- St Paul says "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known." (1 Cor 13:12)
- "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him" (Ephesians 1:17)

    - Prayer is the process by which we begin to wash away that mirror
- God is a Person
    - If I don't know someone well, the conversation in the beginning may be difficult, awkward, etc. But when I get to know someone, a little pause is okay, conversation flows, etc.
    - When I go pray for the first time, I can't expect fire to come out of my fingertips, but consider it like I am being introduced to God for the first time
    - **Persevere in prayer**
- When I have a problem in life, I pray. When something good happens, I give thanks in prayer. When I fall into temptation, I pray for forgiveness. Every aspect of my life, I offer up in prayer.
- When He answers my prayer, when He gives me peace, when He gives me comfort - these are me hearing the voice of God.
- When I begin prayer, I am taking a leap of faith - those who prayed before me, the commandment of God, the Scripture says about prayer. When I start to recognize the fruits of prayer and how helpful and beneficial prayer is, I will start to do it out of my love for God and my love for communicating with Him

**The Holy Spirit and Prayer**

- The Holy Spirit teaches us to pray:
    - "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them,* because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Cor 2:14)
    - Apart from the Holy Spirit we cannot know God
    - He is the Spirit of Truth, who reveals God to us

**Distractions**

- Distraction in prayer is common
- Before I pray, let me sit silently or stand silently for a few minutes to allow my mind to go anywhere
    - What do I have to do tomorrow, what did I do wrong today, this person did this or that, etc.
- Don't let the distraction become a distraction in itself
    - I'm praying and then realize I didn't comprehend or listen to anything in the last five minutes. So I start to think about it and dwell on it and the distraction becomes a distraction in itself. Instead, let me ask God for forgiveness and continue.

**Prayer Canon**

- Personal spiritual rule that your spiritual father sets for you
- e.g. pray something structured in the morning and something structured in the evening
    - Maybe if you've never prayed before and you are starting, Abouna will tell you Our Father, Prayer of Thanksgiving and Psalm 50

    - If you've been praying Agpeya since you were very young, you'll have a different canon
    - Fasting has canons too
    - There's the rule of the church - this is what we ought to pray/fast. And the personal rule based on their particular needs.

**Anything we shouldn't pray about?**

- I have a test, my car's tire pressure is low
- People who pray about things big and small are enhancing that connection that they have with God
- Sometimes we pray about things that are beyond our control
    - e.g. a Test... I can't control what questions will be on it, what I'll remember in the moment, how the grader will feel, etc.
- People who pray for everything are recognizing that everything is in God's control
- The best prayer is "Thy will be done" - I ask for something but I submit my will to God's will
    - I am praying to accept what God chooses
    - I am praying for discernment to know and understand what God chooses

**Expectations about Prayer**

- I expect that God hears my prayer. When I have faith that God hears my prayer, I should have solace and comfort that God, who loves me, has heard my prayer and knows my needs. Therefore, I am in His hands. And if I'm in His hands, then there is nothing for me to worry about
- "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world"
- When I give the burden to God, now the burden is shared. It becomes much easier.

**Advice to Close**

- Speak to your spiritual father in particular
- Pray to God in the morning for Him to direct my day and direct my way and to keep me away from sin and temptation
- Pray to God in the evening and recount the day with Him, ask for forgiveness of the sins I committed, for a safe night

# What is a Spiritual Canon? - HEMY

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## Introduction

- We are all composed of body, and spirit
  - Our body is taken from the earth - that's why the body tends to like the earthly, laziness, sin
  - The spirit is taken from God - so our spirit tends to like holiness and connection with God
  - That's why there is always a war between the flesh and the spirit
- "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." (Galatians 5:17)
- To win the war, there needs to be a spiritual rule/canon/law
- If you don't have a spiritual canon/rule you will be under "spiritual mood"
  - When you have the mood to pray, you will pray
  - When you have the mood to read the bible, you will read the bible
  - People who live by this principal, their spiritual life goes down all the time.
- Our natural tendency is laziness. That's why we don't read the Bible regularly, pray regularly, etc.
- "If anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules." (2 Timothy 2:5)
  - If my spirit is competing with my body, I need to have a rule in order to be crowned at the end
- "Let all things be done decently and in order." (1 Cor 14:40)
  - Spiritual rule will organize your life and make it in order
- Spiritual Growth is tightly connected with the Spiritual Canon
  - "The main difference between the saints and us is seriousness." - HHPS3
  - They took their life seriously
  - They respected their spiritual canon; they did not break it
  - They started as beginners, but because of their seriousness, they grow
  - What is the difference between someone successful in his studies and someone who is not?
    - The one who follows a rule and takes his studying seriously will be successful
    - The one who studies when he feels like it, or when he's in the mood to study, will not be successful

- "So I will sing praise to Your name forever, that I may daily perform my vows." (Psalm 61:8)
  - No one makes vows every day... but he means the spiritual rule. His prayer, reading the Scripture, etc. It's a commitment, it's vows.
- St John the Short, when the devil attacked him to prevent him from praying, he used to say: "Today, at least I am alive, I am here, I can pray - I don't know if tomorrow I will be sick or dead and I won't be able to pray.. so let me pray today."
- "[5] For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those *who live* according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. [6] For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. [7] Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. [8] So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. [9] But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His." (Romans 8:5-8)
  - It is our choice to live according to the flesh or according to the spirit
  - Someone might say: "I want to pray" - "I want to read the bible" - and they make a spiritual rule and discuss with Abouna... but to apply it? Can't. I get bored.
  - **The devil will fight you!**
  - Virtue of Coercion
    - "But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:27)
    - In the beginning it will be difficult but once you develop a habit, it will be easier and you will enjoy it

## Spiritual Rule

- Prayer
  - How many hours of the agpeya?
  - How many psalms in every hour?
  - Personal prayers?
- Readings
  - Scripture
  - Spiritual Books
- Fasting
  - All the fasts of the church
  - Personal fasts
  - How do you fast? Until when do you abstain?
  - Many people don't take fasting seriously.
    - Abstinence has disappeared... no one is doing it.
    - We take milk in our coffee
    - We eat pizza if it's cheese
    - You spoil your flesh instead of disciplining it
- Prostrations
  - Do them in your young age before you come to an age with back problems and knee problems

## Examples of Seriousness in Spiritual Canon

- We worship God how He wants to be worshipped, not how we want to
  - God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son... and he appointed a certain place for the sacrifice at a mountain and it was three days walking away. In the third day he saw it from afar. (Gen 22)
  - Abraham didn't say to God "isn't enough that I will offer my son as a sacrifice? And you want me to walk three days? What difference does it make here or there?"
  - But he respected God
  - We worship God according to what we see right, not according to what God is asking us to do
- David was a king - many responsibilities... but he said "Seven times everyday I will praise Your holy name"
  - But I get tired, I have a long day of school, and lots of studies and I can't do the spiritual canon
  - Yes, it is tiring. Yes it is not convenient. You're right...
  - But what does it mean when the Lord said "enter through the narrow gate?" - "walk in the difficult way?" - this is the narrow gate. When you bring your body into subjection. When you don't make it easy on yourself.
  - "Grant us sobriety, O Lord, that we may know how to stand before You at times of prayer and ascribe unto You the befitting glorification and win the forgiveness of our many sins"
  - "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." (Matthew 11:12) - you need to FORCE yourself into the Kingdom
- Daniel was a captive - like a slave - and the king wanted Daniel and the three youth to eat certain food which is considered unclean for the Jewish people
  - "But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself." (Daniel 1:8)
  - **No excuses**
  - Sometimes we are fasting, invited to a birthday party, break our fast - where is the determination like Daniel?
  - Many go to wedding receptions or birthdays or graduation parties and drink alcohol - but Daniel purposed in his heart.
- John the Baptist
  - Why did the Lord commend John the Baptist? He was **serious in his life**
  - “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? [8] But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft *clothing* are in kings’ houses. [9] But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet." (Matthew 11)
  - He was serious in his spiritual life
- Mary sister of Lazarus
  - Mary chose the good portion - it's time to sit at the feet of the Lord and to learn, so she sat at the feet of the Lord and learned. **No Distractions**
  - But I'm praying and get a text message, let me respond to it

- I'm praying and I get a phone call, answer the call
- Wait until you're done and then answer - what will happen?

## What is a Spiritual Canon?

- A structure that you follow in your spiritual life
  - Prayer, Bible, prostrations, etc.
- "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it." (1 Cor 9:24)

## Why is it important?

- When you are committed to a spiritual canon, you will grow spiritually
  - How to overcome sin of anger? How to overcome sin of lust?
  - How to grow in virtue of humility? How to grow in virtue of love?
  - Pray, Read the Bible, Fast, Prostrations, Go to Church, Confess
  - These are the elements of spiritual canon. If you have a spiritual canon and you are committed to it, you WILL grow spiritually.
- Spiritual Canon will teach you how to be structured/disciplined in your life
  - Give you sense of responsibility
  - Structure
    - 7am I will pray the 1st hour
    - 5pm I will read the Bible
    - 7pm I will pray the 12th hour
  - In the monastery, bell rings 5pm for Vespers Prayer. Everyone drops what they're doing and goes to the church to pray
  - If I am relaxed with it - "Oh I will make this phone call and then read the Bible" - by the end of the night "I'll just read two chapters tomorrow"
- Spiritual Canon will give you satisfaction and spiritual nourishment
  - We will develop self-control against sin when it attacks us
- Strengthens our relationship with God
- Protects us from laziness because we are committed to finish
- Protects us from spiritual moodiness
- A weapon against Satan
  - When the disciples could not cast out a demon the Lord told them: "This kind cannot come out except by prayer and fasting."
- Spiritual Canon helps me to discern God's voice and God's will in my life

## Challenges

- Time
  - But is it true we don't have time? Or God is not our priority? What is the first thing I do in the morning?
  - Time Management: when you manage your time, you are able to do everything. Recall when you go to conventions
  - Collect the fragments: 10min here, 15min there - you want to check your social media? Do it in these fragments of time, so the time of prayer will be a time for

prayer.
- Boredom
  - Fight this through the virtue of coercion and through understanding what we pray

## Components of Spiritual Canon

- Accountability partner
  - Spiritual friend
  - Servant
  - Parent
  - Abouna
- Keep a diary
  - Daily
    - Agpeya (or 1st hour, 12th hour)
    - Bible Reading
    - Prostration (N/A on Sat/Sun)
  - Weekly
    - Sunday Liturgy - some try to choose Fri or Sat, it is short (only 2 hours, maybe I come late so it's only 1.5hr), no sermon, less crowded, etc.) but Sunday is the day of the Lord. You can attend Fri and Sat - but Sunday is A MUST
      - Story about how Egyptian Christians fought for Liturgy on Sunday and the government exception for Christians
    - Vespers
    - Tasbeha
    - Tithing
    - Wed and Fri Fasting
      - Many are not observing this fast
      - If I think that the Lord was betrayed (Wed) and crucified (Fri), instead of ME. And the Lord endured this for my sake... so is it too much to fast Wed and Fri? Which is easier? To fast Wed and Fri? Or to die eternally? As thanksgiving and gratitude for what He did for us, we need to fast these two days with discipline.
  - Monthly
    - Confession every 4-6 weeks
      - Be diligent and honest
      - My relationship with God
        - Spiritual Canon
        - Virtues (Fruit of the Spirit)
      - My relationship with myself
        - Habits
          - Senses
          - Smoking, drinking, partying, pornography, wasting time
          - Music
        - Thoughts
          - Whatever thoughts attack you - lustful, envious, judgmental
      - My relationship with others

        - Family, Friends. Colleagues, Strangers, Enemies
    - Write your confession on a piece of paper, stand before God and pray, and ask Him to forgive you and to give you a new heart, to help you take repentance seriously
    - Then, go to Abouna and confess to the Lord in his presence and ask for any guidance or advice

## Conclusion

- "[17] Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. [18] And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit." (James 5:17-18)
    - He was serious in his spiritual life
    - He was structured
    - So his prayer was strong
- "I will not go into the dwelling of my house, or go up to the bed of my couch; I will not give sleep to my eyes, nor slumber to my eyelids, nor rest to my temples, until I find a place for the Lord and a dwelling place for the God of Jacob." (Psalm 131 - Agpeya 12th Hour)