

## **The Prayer of St. Ephraim**

(comments by Fr. Stephen Rogers and Fr. John Troy Mashburn)

*O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, meddling, lust of power, and idle talk. (Prostration)*

*But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Thy servant. (Prostration)*

*Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins, and not to judge my brother, for blessed art Thou, unto ages of ages. (Prostration)*

### **Sloth (Fr. Stephen)**

“In identifying sloth as a hindrance to spiritual growth, St. Ephraim is not referring to simple laziness. In the sense of the prayer, ‘sloth’ means ‘forgetfulness,’ of which the ascetics refer as the greatest of all sins. It is a form of spiritual lethargy, a form of sleepwalking, in which the spiritual realm is forgotten. It is a life reduced to mere utility: getting ahead or getting even. It is the loss of mystery, wonder and awe. It is forgetting God and the eternal. It is to lose life in making a living.

“Sloth is the loss of life’s true meaning. It is a spiritual anesthetic that dulls us and produces despondency. It produces an aversion to life, a ‘whatever’ attitude, a faint-heartedness that leads to cynicism and apathy.”

### **Meddling (Fr. John)**

Translations of the prayer differ for this sin. The Slavonic translates as faint-heartedness or despair, but the Greek and Arabic is rather specific – maybe best translated as “vain curiosity.” It is easy for us to envision the sin of vanity, but what of curiosity? Intellectual curiosity may be fine, but most of the time ours is not simply that. The sin involves our desire to know things of others, many times for reasons of power and one-ups-man-ship. We want to know in order to make sure that we are “okay,” or worse, that our fellow man is NOT okay. It is involving ourselves in things where we do not belong. As long as we have a log in our own eye, the speck in our neighbor’s eye should not be our concern.

### **Lust of power (Fr. Stephen)**

“In our fallen condition we need enemies and slaves. We invent enemies so that we have someone to blame for our problems and anxieties. My problems are “their fault,” so I can blame them. I can avoid looking inward because “they” are the problem.

“We need slaves in order to be distracted from the fear of death. None of us can control death. None of us can avoid it. So we seek to control as much and as many as we can. We lust for power because we are so fearful of death.”

### **Idle Talk (Fr. Stephen)**

“For St. Ephraim idle talk is much more than frivolity or gossip. Idle talk includes every thought and word that withdraws us from the awe, mystery and beauty of the contemplation of God in all things. “Idle talk” is a secular view of the world and all that is in it. It is seeking to understand without seeking to be inspired. It is the language of things without meaning.”

Fr. Stephen concludes this first set of comments with the following: “Each of these sins relates to our spiritual dullness - Our inability to live or even think in the realm of the spirit, the Kingdom of God. The Lenten journey is all about casting aside this dullness and ‘waking up’ to the reality of God.”

“And so we pray that God would enable us to pursue those virtues which ‘wake us up.’”

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### **Chastity (Fr. Stephen)**

“St. Ephraim is not speaking only of moral purity, although that is included. Chastity is the gathering of all thoughts and actions into purity of seeking God in all things. The chaste life is the life in which every aspect of our being, all of our experiences and all of our efforts are translated into the pursuit of godliness. To be chaste is to make all of life sacramental. It is to fulfill the greatest commandment, to love God with all our heart, mind and strength. Chastity holds a deep respect for life as the greatest gift of God.”

### **Humility (Fr. Stephen)**

“Humility is the heartfelt realization that I have nothing that was not given to me. Humility is the greatest expression of love for God for it recognizes He is everything. Humility recognizes, likewise, the nobility and worth of all other human beings who are created in the image of He Who is everything. Humility is spiritual growth through surrender, not acquisition. It is the ability to ‘see the secrets of the glory of God hidden in every being,’ according to St. Isaac the Syrian. Humility cannot be seen within ourselves, it can only be seen in others.”

### **Patience (Fr. Stephen)**

“Patience is not simply the ability to wait; it is the state of joyful anticipation. Patience is more than the ability to endure; it is the ability to believe, to see beyond the present to the assurance of the future. Patience is belief in the Resurrection. It is the ‘peace that passeth all understanding.’”

### **Love (Fr. John)**

“Love is the crown of all virtues. God is love. For us it is the goal of all spiritual preparation and struggle. As St. Ephraim the Syrian writes, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord with all thy heart and thy soul and with thy might according as thou art able. The sign that thou lovest God is this - that thou lovest thy fellow; and if thou hatest thy fellow, thy hatred is towards God. For it is blasphemy if thou prayest before God while thou art angry.’”

### **Grant me to see my own sins (Fr. John)**

“This is a great gift from God, and one necessary for our spiritual healing. It has been said that it is a greater gift to see one’s sins than to see the Uncreated Light of the Transfiguration. Having seen our sins, we can take action against them. Many struggle to see the depths of sin. We must begin where we are. We must work on the sins (simple though they may be) in front of us. God will reveal those beyond when we make a beginning, but we must be willing to see and begin.”

### **. . . and not to judge my brother. (Fr. John)**

“It is not enough to see our sins. We must refrain from comparisons with others – in thoughts, words, and deeds. This is difficult. Judging those around us presumes we have the capacity and right to judge – both of which are wrong. This does not mean we do not call a sin sin. What it means is that we shouldn’t judge the worthiness or motives of those we see. Maybe their struggles are far more difficult than our own, and the apparent or actual sin seen is their weak point. Put in the same position, we might fall even more quickly than they! Our job is to pray for them, not to judge.”