

Sermons on Prayer

by
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Sermon IV "Helps to Prayer" (Part 1)

"Lord, teach us to pray."
St. Luke 11:1

This was a request made by one of the disciples to our Blessed Lord. He had been engaged in prayer, and "when He ceased one of His disciples said unto Him, Lord teach us to pray as John also taught his disciples."

At first sight it may seem somewhat strange that a disciple of Christ should need to be taught to pray. One would think that to pray was the first thing the disciples would have done; and doubtless it was. Still, they needed instruction in this great duty. He who knew what was in man did not therefore express any astonishment at the request which was made to Him, but graciously complied with it and condescended Himself to be their Teacher. He at once gave to the disciples, and to all Christians to the end of time, that beautiful form which we call the "Lord's Prayer" as a model and guide.

Here let me remark that we can never fully estimate the advantage and blessing of having a prayer dictated by our Lord Himself. We may be sure that it can never fail of an answer if offered aright. The words thus put into our mouths are the expression of feelings, wants and desires which should be ours. My purpose, however, now is not to consider in detail the Lord's Prayer but rather to offer some suggestions which, by God's blessing, may be useful to you, dear brethren, when you desire to pray. The disciples of Christ, as we see from the words of my text, were sensible of their need of instruction and did not hesitate to ask to be taught; and we too may well confess our own similar need. We should therefore welcome any hints or helps for the right fulfillment of this great duty which may be given us. I feel sure that this will be the case with you, and so will go on at once to speak of several helps to prayer, the diligent use of which we may not doubt God will vouchsafe to bless.

First, then, let me counsel you before you begin to pray to try to realize the *presence* of God. In order to do this, pause and force yourself to be serious and reverent. Consider deliberately what it is you are going to do. "Put off your shoes from off your feet for the place whereon you stand is holy ground." Cherish a reverential spirit, especially when about to engage in any act of devotion. Think for a moment of the meek, holy and reverent spirit which pervaded every act done by our Lord Jesus Christ. Strive to feel when about to pray that you are entering God's more immediate presence, that His eye is upon you, that He reads your heart. This doubtless will not be easy to those who have seldom practiced or long neglected it, but we may rest assured that without in some

measure feeling we are in God's presence, we cannot rightly pray; and unless we keep up the consciousness of this, the thoughts soon wander and the spirit flags. The very thought that the eye of God is upon us prepares the mind for those influences of the Holy Spirit which surely reach it as we pray.

If you can avoid it, do not go hastily to your knees or suddenly rise from prayer. The practice savors of irreverence and can hardly be profitable. "He who would pray," says Bishop Horne, "must first retire; meditation which is the mother of devotion is the daughter of retirement. They who do not meditate cannot pray. They who do not retire can do neither." Ponder, then, shortly on the majesty of Him to whom you are going to speak. Think of the excellent glory of the Lord God Almighty. At the same time remember that He is our Father, and that we are His children by adoption and grace. Conceive for a moment, as best you can, the love of the Incarnate Son by whom alone through the Spirit we have access unto the Father. Think of what He did and suffered to save us from death and hell, and exalt us to His own right hand in the Kingdom of Heaven. His "love was stronger than death; many waters could not quench it," and He "first loved us." Meditate also on the gentle yet powerful influences of the Holy Spirit. We cannot explain how spirit acts upon spirit, but we know that the work though invisible is yet most real, and its effects most blessed. With a mind thus attuned to holy things, kneel before Him who sees in secret and in whose "presence is fulness of joy."

[Secondly,] Having thus in some measure realized God's presence, let your first care be to seek for the greatest help to all true devotion -- the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, as we have seen, it is only by Jesus Christ "*through the Spirit*" that we have access unto the Father. The Author and Giver of all spiritual life is God the Holy Ghost. The ability to pray must come from God. The spirit of prayer is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. "The Spirit," says St. Paul, "helps our infirmities, for we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself makes intercession for us." Without His help we cannot pray acceptably. Seek His divine assistance. "If ye then being evil know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" Now with all humility *ask* for this blessed gift and look for the fulfillment of the promise. He will enable us to say "Abba Father." That prayer is sadly wanting during which we are not in some degree sensible of His blessed presence.

Do you ask how you are to know this? I reply that for the most part the Holy Spirit manifests His presence by imparting to us, as we pray, earnest feelings of genuine sorrow for sin, hearty longings for the pardon, grace and favor of God, some personal love for our Lord Jesus Christ, a hungering and thirsting after holiness and entire conformity to the will of God. These desires and feelings are clearly the workings within us of the Holy Spirit. They are the tokens of His presence. Assuredly they do not spring from ourselves. The Spirit is taking of the things of Christ and showing them unto us. As then our most powerful aid to prayer, let us seek the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Of ourselves "we know not what to pray for as we ought," but under the teaching of the Spirit our prayer shall rise as incense before God, and "the lifting up of our hands as the evening sacrifice."

Thirdly, let me exhort you to be *watchful*. St. Peter's direction is: "Be ye therefore sober and *watch* unto prayer." Necessary as is the habit of watchfulness at all times to the Christian, it is especially needful to him when he prays. What sincere man is there who has not felt this? Who has not bitterly reproached himself for his neglect of watchfulness? Watch first, my brethren, against wandering thoughts for they often most grievously harass. Very frivolous are the objects on which the thoughts at times settle. We are so surrounded by sights and sounds of earth, and our hearts are so full of earthly hopes and desires, that truly nothing but the grace of God vouchsafed on constant watchfulness can enable us to fix our attention on the solemn act in which we are engaged. If we would shut out the world, and subdue self, and be alone with God, we must "watch unto prayer." We cannot pour out our hearts to God if we allow our thoughts to carry us whithersoever they list [wish]. We must then firmly control our thoughts and resolve not to be drawn aside by them. If we look back on past prayers, we shall probably see that the reason why they were so cold and ineffectual, and we ourselves have made so little progress, is that we did not watch thereunto with all perseverance.

Watch also carefully against presumption and undue familiarity with God in prayer. It is true that God is our Father and that we are His children. Eternity itself will alone suffice in which to show forth our praise and thanksgiving for this manifestation of His love. It is true also that in speaking to our Father we should speak to Him without servility, and [rather] in tones of confidence and love. But it is equally true that as a Father He is entitled to our reverence. "A son," says God by the mouth of His Prophet, "honors his father and a servant his master; if I then be a father, where is my honor?" If we are bound, as most surely we are, to honor our earthly parents, much more are we bound to reverence our Father in Heaven. Guard then carefully against undue familiarity and irreverence in prayer. They are not marks of real growth in grace but rather the reverse.

Let us remember that God is in Heaven and we are on earth; that He is infinitely glorious and holy and that we are grievous sinners; and that it is only as sinners brought nigh to Him by the blood of His dear Son that we can ever dare to approach Him. When the prophet Isaiah saw in vision the Seraphim before the Throne, each of which bright and holy beings had six wings, we read that "with twain they covered their faces," as though unworthy to behold God, and "with twain they covered their feet," as though unworthy to serve Him. Those winged messengers of light and blessedness, who had kept their first estate and never sinned, presumed not on their nearness to the Throne and to Him that sits thereon. Let us then, although permitted to draw near with boldness to the Throne of Grace, learn at all times to offer prayers "with reverence and godly fear."

[Fourthly,] Another help to devotion will be found in serious *self examination*. This practice honestly employed cannot fail to afford much assistance. We cannot know, or know to any purpose, our sinfulness and need of amendment and of the grace of God unless we look carefully into our hearts and lives. He who never does this remains ignorant of his true condition in the sight of God, ignorant of his sins, ignorant of the numerous defects in his character. The true reason why so many are self-satisfied undoubtedly is that they do not know themselves. They think, like the Laodiceans of old, that they "have need of nothing." But self-examination, by God's grace, removes the veil.

It teaches that precious knowledge -- the knowledge of *self* -- and when self is in any measure revealed, it cannot but be that the man will seek for deliverance.

As a valuable help to prayer let me advise you, my brethren, frequently and carefully to examine yourselves. Begin by asking how you have lived in the years that have already passed. Those years will never return, and you probably have forgotten much that passed in them. But not one single circumstance that happened in all those years has been overlooked or forgotten by God. All are in His remembrance. Surely this is a thought of awe. Not one single act have we ever done which God did not see. Not one single thought has ever passed through our minds which He did not know. Have then your lives hitherto been such as our Heavenly Father could approve?

And then in your self examination turn from the years that are past to time present, and ask yourselves what you are doing now. Are you living your daily life in the flesh in the faith of the Son of God who loved you and gave Himself for you? Are you glorifying God in your bodies and in your spirits which are His? Are you acting as stewards of all that you possess? Are you walking as strangers and pilgrims here below with a longing eye to a better country, that is a Heavenly? What are your most frequent thoughts and desires? What are your habits and tempers? In some such way as this let me entreat you, dear brethren, to examine yourselves. You will find the practice very helpful to prayer. Abundant matter for supplication does self examination furnish. He who practices it, by the grace of God, gets to see and know and feel his wants; becomes, in short, acquainted with his true state; and is thus led to seek, as he never sought before, the mercy and grace which he so greatly needs. Let me again exhort you to employ this useful help. If you pray with a deep sense of your true condition, seeking the Holy Spirit's aid, the words of your mouth and the meditations of your heart will be acceptable in the sight of that merciful Lord who is our strength and our Redeemer.

Here I must leave this branch of my subject until next Sunday when I hope to return to it. Meanwhile let me ask you seriously to meditate on what you have heard. May I not also ask those who have not already done so, to make trial of the helps to prayer which I have already mentioned? They are worthy of a trial, and we may be sure earnest prayer abundantly rewards us for all the pains we take with it. Its sweetness and blessing seem to be proportioned by God to the amount and sincerity of the labor we bestow upon it. The more pains, the more blessing. How many there are who take no pains at all, who never try to cultivate spiritual affections, and whose hearts are hard and cold.

Let us for our parts resolve from this day to be more painstaking with our prayers than we have ever yet been. Let us endeavor as we pray to realize God's presence, [to] seek the Holy Spirit's aid, [and to] diligently watch and carefully examine ourselves. Let us bear in mind that every petition which we offer is heard and considered by God, and all prayer offered aright is answered. Let us also remember for our encouragement that the more we converse with God the more will He manifest Himself unto us. It will be with us as with the Patriarch of old: "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees Thee." As we advance in the practice of this blessed duty, our life will become more "hid with Christ in God." He will "keep us secretly in His pavilion from the strife of tongues."

The mind which was in Christ Jesus will gradually be formed in us, and all the changes and chances of this mortal life will not only be cheerfully borne but thankfully embraced, because they are the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning us. The promise is: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee."

"Helps to Prayer" in Samuel Bentley, *Sermons on Prayers* (London: William Skeffington, 1871).