

"The Nature of Prayer"

by
John Girardeau

"Men ought always to pray."
Luke 18:1

Note: The following sermon on prayer is the first of five delivered late in 1865 in Zion Presbyterian Church, Glebe street, Charleston. A note by Dr. Girardeau says: "Daily prayer was offered by crowds of worshippers for the success of the Confederate struggle. In consequence of its disastrous result, many of God's people were, by Satanic influence, tempted to slack their confidence in prayer. These sermons were a humble attempt to help them under this trial."

In these words our Savior inculcates the habitual and unremitting discharge of the duty of prayer. He obviously contemplates it as of importance so indispensable as that it admits of no suspension or serious interruption of its discharge. The reason of this is sufficiently evident. Prayer is a duty of universal significance. There can be no religion without it, and the degree of practical piety must always correspond with the extent to which it is performed. It may be said to be the prime duty of all religion, whether that of nature or of the Gospel of Christ. Not only does it possess an intrinsic value of its own which is absolutely immeasurable, but it is the essential concomitant, the necessary stimulus and support of all other religious duties. It goes hand in hand with the cultivation of Christian graces, and the performance of legal obligations. As it is passive, it is the grand recipient of that divine grace and strength which energize the soul; and as it is active, it reacts most salutarily upon the fervor of religious emotions, is positively influential in the production of the most important results, and powerfully propels the suppliant in the path of spiritual obedience.

A just and scriptural consideration of this vitally important subject can at no time be inappropriate, or suited to promote other than beneficial ends, but there are certain exigencies in the experience of God's people when it claims more than ordinary attention. Especially when confidence in its efficacy has been weakened if not impaired by the occurrence of afflictive and disastrous events against which its aid had been invoked, and the sneer of the skeptic is, "Where is now thy God who professes to be the hearer of prayer," it becomes us to re-examine its nature and its grounds, and to settle afresh our faith in its divinely-appointed force.

It has probably struck us all, my brethren, that under just such circumstances we now find ourselves actually placed; and anxious as I am to accommodate the ministrations of the pulpit to your present necessities, I have thought it not inappropriate to take up, in several discourses, this great duty of prayer, and to endeavor, with God's blessing, to indicate its nature, its grounds, its spirit, and its efficacy, and then to answer if possible the objections which skepticism or a flagging faith may urge against its continued discharge. And I am impelled to this course by the profound conviction that we need all our religion to sustain us now, and that without the active exercise of prayer, though the principle of religion may not cease to exist, it will be practically dormant and inoperative either as to the performance of duty or the supply of consolation.

Your attention will first be directed to the question, *What is the nature of prayer?* It need scarcely be observed that prayer has a wider and a narrower signification. In its wider sense, it comprehends the elements of adoration of God, confession of sin, and a thankful acknowledgment of the mercies which we may receive. In its narrower acceptation, it is simply petitionary or supplicatory in its character. In this point of view it is the preferment of our request to God for the blessings which He, and He alone, is competent to bestow. It is to this latter aspect of it that these remarks will be mainly devoted.

I would here take occasion to remind you, my friends, that there are certain great and fundamental truths which, at the outset of the discussion, will be taken for granted. It is assumed that God is, and that He is the rewarder of such as diligently seek Him. I shall not for the present, at least, pause to discuss with the Atheist the question of the divine existence, or with the Pantheist that of the divine personality

Conceding, then, that God exists, that He is possessed of personal attributes which render communion with Him possible, and that He is both willing and competent to answer our petitions for His blessing, the question which now solicits our consideration is, ***What is prayer?***

I. In the first place it is clear that true prayer must include, as its first great element, the offering up of our real desires unto God. There may be the form of prayer without the desires of the heart, but there cannot be true prayer without them. All petition supposes a condition of want which requires to be relieved. It is the experimental sense, or the intellectual conviction, of need, which originates desire. The hungry man prays for bread, and the thirsty man prays for drink because they desire them to supply their wants. He who is not hungry may ask for bread, and he who is not thirsty may beg for drink, but as the petitions they offer are not prompted by desire springing from a real want, they are destitute of sincerity and are not worthy of being answered. In like manner the wretched man desires happiness, the guilty pardon, the impure holiness, and the lost salvation, when they experience in their souls a want of these invaluable blessings. But it is conceivable that formal petitions may be offered to God for these benefits without that desire for them which is grounded in a sense of need. In these cases the professed suppliant tampers with the majesty of God, which is offended by his insincerity; or trifles with the omniscience of God, which he must all the while be conscious is able to detect the hypocrisy and to unmask the pretence.

It is not sufficient, then, that the attitude and gesture, the look and tone of supplication be assumed. It is not sufficient that a certain formula of devotion be employed in accordance with the demands of custom or in obedience to motives which are simply mercenary or selfish. It is not sufficient that a clamorous repetition of empty words be used under the impression that the Deity must needs be affected with such a quantity of entreaty. It is absolutely essential that the real desires of the heart should urge the prayers which we offer to the Giver of every good and perfect gift, or all our petitions--arrayed though they be in language ever so sublime--are offensive to God and barren of beneficial results. They are nothing but sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. When we come with the conviction of want and the language of sincere desire, it is then only [that] we "draw near" to God, The heart must speak or the ear of God is deaf to the voice of the petition.

II. It deserves also to be considered that the desires which we experience and the prayers which they prompt should be for things that are agreeable to the will of God, otherwise no true prayer is presented. It is hypocrisy to ask for blessings which we do not desire. It is presumption to pray for those which are contrary to the divine will. If the objects of prayer be unlawful, the prayer itself is illegitimate. The will of God is the expression of His holy nature and perfections, and wherever it is made known to us it becomes the standard of reference and the rule of action. It is evidently possible that we may transgress this will in our prayers, both in regard to the things which we seek and the motives which suggest our petitions. If either the reasons in which prayer is conceived or the ends it desires to secure are contrary to the will of God the prayer itself is intrinsically wrong.

The objects which we seek in prayer are of two kinds. They may be either spiritual or temporal, and the rule which has been indicated will apply with equal force to both of these classes. It will hardly require discussion to show that in those cases in which the revealed will of God, as contained in His Word, is transcended by our petitions, they are not conceived in the spirit of true and legitimate prayer. It is always lawful to ask those blessings for which the Scriptures authorize us to pray; always wrong to seek those things which they forbid us to desire, or the supplications for which are prompted by motives which they will not justify. The Word as the expression of the will of God specifies the things for which we may properly pray and indicates the motives which will meet the divine approbation. To ask other

things than these, or to pray from other motives than these, is to be guilty of impiety in our professed homage to God, and to make worship itself the vehicle of sin. To seek from God those things which He has plainly told us we ought not to desire is to treat Him as wayward and exacting children would a father whom they regard as too weak to adhere to his own will, or to abide by those rules which he has laid down for the government of his house. Thus far all is clear. There can be no dispute as to the position that it is wrong to pray for those things which the Scriptures, as the revealed or preceptive will of God, forbid us to seek, and that those petitions in which this is done do not partake of the nature of true and legitimate prayer. Nor, on the other hand, will any question exist as to the propriety of those supplications which the Scriptures authorize us to present.

There is, however, another aspect of the will of God in reference to which the case may not be equally free from perplexity. A distinction has been drawn, and, it strikes me, validly drawn between the revealed or preceptive will of God contained in the written word, and the secret or decretive will of God which He has not thought proper to disclose in the same formal manner. It sometimes pleases Him to indicate this latter aspect of His supreme will with greater or less distinctness in the procedures of His providence; and whenever in this mode it becomes definitely known to us we are bound to pay it the same deference and render it the same obedience as we yield to the dicta of His written word.

But there are numerous cases in which this secret will of God is not distinctly made known to us. He reserves to Himself that prerogative of sovereignty the glory of which it sometimes is to conceal a thing. He is not under obligation to give account of His matters unto any. As the ruler of the universe and the supreme arbiter of events, He disposes of all things in accordance with His own secret purposes. Now, we are bound to submit to the decisions of God's will, whether they are revealed or not. It cannot, it is true, become to us a rule of action when it is not revealed; but even then it claims our profoundest homage and our most implicit submission. It exists, though it be not made known; and as it is eternally the rule of the divine government, we are under obligation to refer to it all our states of mind, all our acts, and all our circumstances in life. In all cases about which our prayers may be concerned it behooves us to refer the final decision--the ultimate result--to the supreme though secret will of God.

Let me endeavor to illustrate this truth, for it appears to me to be one of great importance. In those cases, for example, in which we are clearly authorized by the written word to offer prayer for blessing, we are not discharged from the obligation to submit the matter to the decision of God's secret will. This is true, I conceive, even in reference to prayer for spiritual benefits. For even in those cases He has reserved to Himself the right to answer or not, and the disposal of the time, circumstances and mode in which He will bestow blessings when He sees fit to grant a favorable response. We pray for an increase of a certain grace within us. We are right. But it is for God to decide whether He will comply with our request as to the thing sought or as to the mode and measure in which the request shall be met. We pray to be delivered from a certain temptation. We are right. So the Apostle Paul prayed against the thorn in the flesh. But it is for God to decide whether we shall be delivered or not. It is sometimes the case, to go still farther, that God calls us to do what He does not mean us to do and authorizes us to pray for blessings which He does not intend to confer. He called Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, but He did not mean to permit him to perform the act itself. He tests our obedience, and at the same time fulfils His own wise and secret purposes. Paul was authorized to pray for exemption from a certain form of temptation, but God did not intend to grant him that exemption. He gave him, it is true, what was better--His sufficient grace, which enabled him successfully to resist it. He accomplishes, thus, our discipline in holiness, and works out concurrently the behests of His sovereign will.

It will be perceived, then, my brethren, that even in those cases in which we do not disobey the revealed will of God in offering our prayers, they must still be presented in profound submission to His secret will. Our blessed Savior Himself prayed that He might be delivered from drinking the cup of His last dreadful sufferings, but meekly referred the decision of the matter to the sovereign will of God. "Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done"!

This principle will go far to solve the apparent difficulty arising frequently from the nonfulfilment of promises which on their face are limited by no qualification. It must always be assumed, as a tacit condition, that God has reserved to Himself the right of acting in regard to them in accordance with His sovereign will. In some instances the limiting circumstances may be plainly gathered either from the Scriptures themselves, or from the course of God's providence. If, for example, one should now pray for the faith which enabled the believer to perform miracles, he would fail to secure it, though the promises concerning it appear to be unqualified. God has withdrawn this particular gift from His church. This was one of Edward Irving's great mistakes, which tended to cripple a ministry of extraordinary power.

The same principle ought always to be applied to prayers in which benefits of a temporal nature are sought. In the general, those blessings which come under this class are promised to believers so far as they may be needful to them. The Divine Word guarantees them, and authorizes us to pray for them. In these cases where the motives which lead us to ask them are unlawful, or where the things desired are themselves forbidden to us in the Scriptures, we clearly have no right to pray. In the other instances in which we are authorized to seek them, we should never lose sight of the great fact that God bestows, or does not bestow, them in accordance with His holy and sovereign will; and in the event of their not being attained in answer to prayer, it is our duty to lay our hands upon our mouths, to refrain from charging God foolishly, and to render implicit and unquestioning submission to that will.

And let it never be forgotten that there are many specific forms of temporal blessings for which we are often led to pray which God has never pledged Himself to confer. He gives us promises, in the general, and has reserved to Himself the particular application of them. In such cases it is manifestly our duty to yield the most perfect deference to His decisions. He promises that the prayer of faith shall save the sick; but He has not promised that this or that particular individual who is sick shall, through prayer, be restored. We are authorized to pray for the recovery of the sick and to believe that our prayer will be answered, until the providence of God decides adversely, when our duty [then] is to submit. God promises to deliver His people who call upon Him in the day of trouble, but He has not pledged Himself to deliver a certain individual from what he conceives to be evil. . . .

God has promised to uphold truth and to support right, but He has not pledged Himself in every particular conflict in which truth grapples with error and right with wrong to render truth and right for the present triumphant. He may suffer them, for wise purposes, to undergo apparent defeat and to be exposed to a tempest of opprobrium, oppression and scorn. In these cases it is our duty to sustain ourselves by the consideration that God does His will, and that the Judge of all the earth will do right. And to him who thus in disappointment and suffering, baffled in his hopes, and tempted to skepticism (yet honors God by a meek and uncomplaining submission due from a sinful, short-sighted creature to infinite wisdom and absolute sovereignty), it will in time be made conspicuously to appear as clearly as the flash of a sunbeam through the fissures of a dissolving cloud that benefits were withheld for the bestowal of greater, that temporary suffering is but the prelude to everlasting blessing, short-lived disappointment to the dawn of unfading honor, and that truth and right go down beneath a horizon of darkness and an ocean of storms only to reappear in the morning glory of an eternal triumph. Jesus as an infirm, dying human being, staggering under the curse of a world, prayed that He might be delivered from suffering the second death. His prayer was unanswered and He died; but His grave was the scene of death's dethronement and the birthplace of unnumbered millions of deathless souls redeemed from Satan, sin and hell.

Hold, Christian brother! Do not despair because your prayers for certain blessing, however apparently great, have for a time been unanswered. Where is your faith? Where is your allegiance to your almighty, all-wise, all-merciful Sovereign? Collect yourself. Put on the panoply of God. Stand against these troops of fiends that would dislodge you from the citadel of your faith. Look up. God, your redeemer and deliverer, reigns! See, He sits on yonder throne, and suns and systems of light are but

the sparkling dust beneath His feet. Thousands of thousands of shining seraphs minister before Him. Infinite empire is in His grasp. The sceptre of universal dominion is borne aloft in His almighty hand. His eye is upon His afflicted people. See, see, He comes, He comes, riding upon the wings of the whirlwind, wielding His glittering sword bathed in the radiance of heaven, driving His foes like chaff before His face, and hastening to the succor of His saints with resources of boundless power and illimitable grace.

III. Let us pass on briefly to consider the third essential element in true prayer--a thoroughgoing reliance upon the atoning merits and advocacy of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer is a duty of universal obligation. We are bound by the very conditions of our being, as the creatures of God's power, the subjects of His government, and the pensioners of His bounty, to render worship to Him and to express our dependence upon Him in the form of supplication. But, on the supposition of sin, it is impossible to see on what natural grounds we would have a right to approach Him with entreaties for His favor. Exiles from His presence, condemned by His law, and doomed by His justice to perpetual exclusion from His fellowship, we might indeed roar out our petitions for relief from our misery, but could be consoled by not the most distant hope of audience and acceptance. It has, however, pleased God to bridge this gulf which separated us from Him, and which would otherwise have been forever impassable by us.

In the mediation of His dear Son, who, being God and man in one person, was competent to reconcile us to His Father, we have a way of access opened to us through which we are again privileged to approach the divine throne with our supplications and our prayers. The atoning blood of Jesus removes the guilt of the believer and pleads for his acceptance with melting accents and irresistible power. To offer prayer without a reliance upon the person and the work of the great Mediator is to bar the door of audience against ourselves. Reliance upon His atoning merits is absolutely necessary, therefore, to the existence of true and effectual prayer. Having, therefore, brethren, says the Apostle Paul, boldness to enter into the holiest of all by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near. And let it be also borne in mind that had we not in the person of the Lord Jesus a righteous advocate on high, a merciful and faithful high-priest who, having passed through the heavens, appears for us in His Father's presence, no prayers that we could offer would rise into those holy courts. Polluted as we are in our persons and defiled as we are in our best services, it is out of the question for us to approach directly to the throne of the majesty on high. It is the province of the great Intercessor to offer His blood as the reason of the sinner's accepted approach, to take into His own priestly hands the prayers of the suppliant, and perfuming them with the incense of His glorious sacrifice to present them before His Father's throne. True prayer, then, my friends, involves a heartfelt recognition of the advocacy of the great Redeemer, and a humble dependence for acceptance upon His availing intercession.

IV. The last element which I shall mention as necessary to the existence of true prayer is the gracious assistance of the Holy Spirit. Blinded by sin as we are, we would, in ourselves, be ignorant of the objects for which we should pray, and be unable, did we know them, to pray in an acceptable manner. The apostle teaches us that it is one part of the condescending and merciful office of God's blessed Spirit to supply these wants. "Likewise," says he, "the Spirit also helps our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered." From this consoling passage we learn that coming into our hearts as the promised "Spirit of grace and of supplication," the Holy Ghost graciously helps us while struggling under our infirmities, while conscious of our unworthiness and ashamed to appear before God, while vainly endeavoring to collect our scattered thoughts and wandering affections, and almost hopeless in the effort to school our stammering tongues to utter the language of sincere petition. He illuminates our souls with a knowledge of our real wants and stimulates our desires for that grace which alone is able to relieve them. And then remaining in us, (what wondrous mercy that such dullness and reluctance to pray and proneness to sin as we constantly oppose to His heavenly offices do not drive Him from us in unappeasable anger!) remaining with us, He responds from the depths of our poor, sinful hearts to the pleas that Jesus pours out for us in the heavens and makes intercessions for us with

unutterable groanings.

"The Nature of Prayer" in *Sermons by John L. Girardeau*, ed. Rev. George A. Blackburn (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1907). **Note:** Punctuation has been modernized.