

Discourses, Doctrinal and Practical

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Sermon VIII

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."
James 5:16

Two facts are here affirmed: that prayer is efficacious, [and] that the efficacy of prayer is proportioned to its holy energy. The words ^aeffectual, fervent,^o represent one Greek word, which might be rendered ^aenergized,^o *inwrought*. Prayer is not words nor attitudes, nor merely a desire feebly felt and coldly uttered to a being scarcely recognized. The spirit of prayer is the result of energy, and is itself the highest form of energy. It is the mighty result of the power of the Holy Spirit who ^asearches the deep things of God,^o aiding our infirmities and making ^aintercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.^o The prince of apostles [Paul], accounting for his own Christian efficiency, says that God wrought mightily in him [Col. 1:29]. It is likewise inwrought by our own efforts and the assiduous cultivation of religious principles and sentiments in our hearts.

We first maintain, then,

I. THAT PRAYER MAY PREVAIL WITH GOD.

This fact is more doubted than denied. Many who affirm it would find, on a close scrutiny, that they in reality disbelieve it. For our belief is controlled and our feelings are determined by many propositions which we have never framed into language, and much less accepted on sufficient evidence. One of these propositions is that prayer has no tendency to influence God, or in another form, "I shall receive no benefit in answer to prayer." We believe that proposition every day we live without prayer, every time we rise discouraged from prostration in prayer. It becomes us then to look closely into the sources of evidence on this very important question: May prayer prevail with God, or is it unreasonable to expect to receive what we ask from God? And I now affirm in view of all objections that there are no valid reasons for doubting that prayer may bring us blessings from God, directly and indirectly, which we should not procure without it.

Let us, then, notice that all our objections to a full belief in the efficacy of prayer arise from a greater confidence in our own unaided reasonings and certain intuitive convictions than in the testimony of God. [This is] a vain confidence by which we make it impossible that God should teach us anything we cannot know without his instruction.

In this connection, therefore, I would remind you of one or two facts which tend to modify an extravagant confidence in our reason.

One is this: The Author of nature has not consulted human wisdom in the arrangement of even material causes. We know that fire consumes wood. But how do we come to know it? By reasoning beforehand how it ought to be? No. There is not a single law of matter or mind that man has found out by anticipation. He has indeed conjectured, after seeing the operation of a cause in one set of circumstances, that it might operate equally in another. But then he has depended on previous observation for this conjecture, and on subsequent observation to confirm the conjecture. And human reason, therefore, is no more competent to deny that prayer may move God, and so move all second causes, than it was competent to deny that the same force which makes an apple fall to the ground binds the planetary system together. God has not waited for human wisdom in arranging causes and effects; and he may, therefore, have given prayer a place which that wisdom would not have assigned it.

But again: The Author of nature has contradicted the wisdom of man in the constitution of the universe. I mean by "the wisdom of man" his mere logic independent of his observation, and those impressions or perceptions to which men yield such firm credence even in opposition to the Scriptures. For more than five thousand years from the creation of the world the wisest men were continually making the most egregious blunders in describing the processes of nature. Every ancient cosmogony, but that of Moses, is now seen to be a mass of folly. The reason of man was continually declaring how things ought to be and must be. But when Lord Bacon at length arose to disenthral [liberate] the human mind, he showed that, except in the department of abstract truth (as mathematics and metaphysics), they must look outward; that evidence, not intuition, must guide them. Conjectures concerning the Creator's plans and modes of action were useless, and if confided in, injurious.

We now see that human reason, without any testimony from God to guide it, was perfectly unable to tell how he ought to make a universe or how he had made it. If, then, men have reasoned so short of the truth and so against it in regard to material causes, why should we trust our reason against the testimony of God in the higher departments of truth?

These general considerations we adduce before making a more particular examination of the objections which human reason presents to the efficacy of prayer. It is perfectly manifest that there is no solid, rational ground for denying or doubting the efficacy of prayer, because the whole subject lies beyond the [rational] sphere of intuitive or abstract reasoning. Yet there are objections which these general views are not sufficient to remove.

[First] One may be thus stated: "We are conscious of an immeasurable disparity between the Infinite mind and our limited understandings. We cannot teach him anything. When we tell him our wants and feelings, he knows beforehand all that we can say, and more than we can say, so that our expressions at last come short of his knowledge. Is it not then a loss of time and a vain ceremony to make such addresses to the Deity? Even we ourselves find it very irksome to hear from a person a long recital of his troubles, and especially when we happen to know the whole story before he begins to recount it." (This is the strongest form I can give the objection.)

Now there are at least three distinct grounds upon which its entire futility can be shown: [1] the very nature of communion, [2] the relations and feelings of a teacher, and [3] those of a parent.

[1] If there be a possibility of such a thing as communion between God and his creatures, then that communion must be the interchange of thoughts and feelings. To be intellectual, social, and spiritual, it must be that and nothing else than that. It might indeed be more interesting to Jehovah to commune with the archangels, their range of thought being so much loftier and their emotions being so much nobler than ours. Yet, if *we* are to commune with God, it must be by imparting *our* thoughts to him and expressing our emotions, such as they are. So that, unless it can be shown that the Creator is forever to be cut off from all intellectual and social communion with all his creatures (for the objection as really lies against his communion with angels and archangels), then our intellectual disparity is not a good and sufficient reason why we should not pray.

[2] Moreover, we can learn from the feelings of a teacher, who takes a deep interest in the communication of his pupil, how God can be pleased to hear our prayers. It is not so much that the pupil imparts any information or that his notions are all correct, but it is because he is making progress, and because this is the way in which he is to be developed. Our heavenly Father may see that by no exercise we perform do we make such progress in all spiritual attainments as by fervent, energized prayer.

[3] And then again, the parental feelings explain much. In the nursery, words are not weighed with the balance of the schools. The first distinct utterance of the endearing epithet "Father" from an infant's lips has more eloquence to his ear than the most learned and skilful orator ever utters. Nay, the prattling of the little creature finds its way to the deepest recesses of sensibility in the soul. We must remember, then, that our prayer commences thus: "Our Father." Call it prattling if you please, but a father's ear is to receive it and a father's heart to appraise it. Say that the recital of our troubles is tedious to Gabriel if you please, but remember it is not Gabriel but our heavenly Father who is to hear it.

[Second] A kindred difficulty to this is, that "there is such majesty and grandeur in the King of heaven that we are too mean [lowly] to approach him." It may suffice now to say, in reference to this embarrassment, that it can be turned into an encouragement by applying to it one passage of the Word: "*If I be a Father, where is my honor; and if I be a Master, where is my fear?*" The legitimate consequence of his majesty and authority and glory is to exact homage, adoration, and praise. This spiritual tribute of thanksgiving and praise, this humble confession of sin and recognition of dependence, is precisely the kind of revenue which we can furnish to the king's treasury, and therefore just the kind that he expects of us.

There is one blessed line of Scripture worth infinitely more than all the deductions of an earth-born wisdom: the High and Mighty One declares, "*Whoso offers praise, glorifies me.*"

[Third] Another doubt arises from the divine goodness, about which we sometimes reason thus: "If God is infinitely kind and disposed to promote our welfare, then he will not withhold any blessing simply because we do not ask for it or ask with sufficient fervor. Nor would he more bestow it for our asking." Now upon all this logic we ask two questions: [1] Is it so in fact? [2] Ought it to be so of right?

[1] As to the matter of fact, we may make our experiment in any department of life. Man

needs, for example, an abundant supply of the fruits of the earth. Let him then apply this shorthand inference from God's goodness to this case. God is kind and disposed to bestow every good thing on all his creatures; therefore he will not withhold any needful quantity of Indian corn and wheat and vegetables simply because we do not perform this or that agricultural operation. Nor is it reasonable to think he will the more bestow it for our labors. Does omnipotent Goodness require the aid of plows and harrows to feed his children? Here we see the reasons to be entirely contradictory to facts. For we know that it holds true in regard to every department of life--"*the hand of the diligent makes rich, but the sluggard comes to want.*"

And there can be no reason, derived from the kindness of God, to show that it is not as true of praying as of plowing. And as we can see how the welfare of man and of society is promoted by the arrangement which creates a necessity for labor, and how this arrangement is a fruit of the divine goodness in all the arts and employments of life, so we can see how the goodness of God may have made prayer a necessary means of procuring many indispensable blessings, on account of its direct benefit to us. Nothing in its place more cultivates the character than fervent, effectual, or energized prayer; and there is, in itself, considered no higher privilege to man than this communing and pleading with the Most High. It may be found true that prayer is the chief instrument of our spiritual cultivation, considered only in its direct influence on ourselves.

Look at it in this light. Temptation has no power to the soul while in communion with its Maker. Every truth in the Scriptures completes its work in us when it leads us to address God with appropriate feeling. Providence completes its work in us when it leads [us] to bless the hand that feeds, to kiss the hand that smites us--"*Is any afflicted, let him pray*" . . . Sympathy with a Holy Redeemer, in regard to his kingdom, gains nowhere on the heart as in prayer.

[Fourth] A fourth difficulty is with the Omniscience, Foreknowledge, and Unchangeableness of God. The force of the objection is this: "If he has determined from all eternity what he will do, or if he knows everything that we can tell him, our telling him cannot change his view so as to induce him to change his purpose." This chilling argument is with many persons very powerful. It is strange that it should be so with some who, if asked whether they believe in the foreknowledge of God, would promptly answer, "By no means". But with those who believe that all things are known to him from the foundation of the world, there is an easy escape from this difficulty.

They may know their reasoning to be unsound because it does not apply to anything else where they may test its validity. They might just as well refuse to plant as to pray on this ground. God knows the results in the one case as much as in the other. And your sowing the seed in expectation of a crop is just as inconsistent with his foreknowledge as your praying for rain, or success in business, or the conversion of a soul in expectation of such result.

Let it be borne in mind that no such view of God's attributes should ever be held as reduces him to a machine, an automaton, instead of a rational being--thinking, deciding, and acting in view of facts. None can doubt that the characters and conduct of men influence the purposes of God. If a man obeys God he gives him the reward of obedience; and if he disobeys, the punishment due to disobedience. Then it is manifest that our actions affect the purposes and

actions of God; and why not our worship, our praying, considered either as praying or as a form of obedience? Let two men present themselves before God at the same moment--a blasphemer and a humble suppliant--the one to mock the other to pray. Do they both affect him alike? Will his treatment of both be the same? Impossible!

[Fifth] A kindred objection to prayer and almost identical with this is, that "God is acting from fixed laws. Prayer for rain can do no good because rain is the result of specific material causes which act by regular and purely mechanical forces, not depending upon any present volition of the Creator but merely upon that original volition which called them into existence." Now here it is assumed that no other than material causes or forces can affect matter. This is contradicted by creation, by miracles, and by the moral purposes for which the universe was created. It assumes that God has left no place for his own direct action. It assumes that you know all the causes of events, and that prayer is not one.

[Sixth] The Holiness and Justice of God too have discouraged some from praying. This I esteem as really the greatest difficulty on the whole subject, and yet that which sceptics never suggest and the worldly-minded do not feel. The other difficulties exist only in our imaginations; this lies deep in the character of Jehovah and the principles of his eternal kingdom. This is a difficulty which no reasoning would ever have removed, which no efforts of man could ever have diminished.

To meet and remove this, the whole arrangement of the incarnation, death, resurrection, and mediation of Christ was made. To this I understand the term "righteous" in the text [James 5:16] to refer. It is a technical term and must, by every true biblical scholar, be admitted to mean more than a mere worldly uprightness. It belongs to the man who can say, "In the Lord have I righteousness"; who has found in the Lord Jesus the baptism of a legal purification, extending first to the conscience, then to the heart; who, being freely pardoned for Christ's sake, freely obeys the law of Christ; who has boldness to approach the mercy-seat, but solely because Christ is the great intercessor, ever representing the believer and his prayers before the Father.

On this Gospel-ground, the justice and holiness of God present no obstacles to the prayer of the penitent believer living in the righteousness of a practical obedience. We are exhorted to come boldly to a throne of grace, not because we have never sinned but "because we have such a High Priest." How beautifully is it described in the third chapter of Zechariah! Joshua the high priest represents, not the great High Priest, but that royal priesthood of which the church consists. He "was clothed in filthy garments." That was his character estimated by the perfect law of God. And Satan was standing at his right hand to resist him. But the Lord, who redeems his church by the shedding of his own blood, said to those who stood before him, *"Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment. And I said, Let them set a fair mitre upon his head. So they set a fair mitre upon his head, and clothed him with garments"* [Zech. 3:4,5]. That explains the manner and exhibits the reason why human prayers are heard by him who is infinite in holiness. . . .

These, we believe, are the main theoretical difficulties which induce us to relax in the exercise of prayer. And thus far we have reasoned independently of the authority of the Scriptures; not

that we imagine there can be any other positive ground of confidence on this point, nor that we believe the natural reason is competent to determine this great question. But we have desired to show, simply, that there are in reality no solid objections to the doctrine we are now exhibiting.

The argument from the Scriptures may [now] be briefly stated.

II. PRAYER WILL PREVAIL WITH GOD.

Let us turn to

1. **The commands.** They are such as these: "*Pray without ceasing.*" "*I will, therefore, that men pray everywhere.*" "*The end of all things is at hand; be therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.*" "*Seek the Lord while he may be found.*" Commands of this nature abound, and are addressed, with the other general precepts of God's law, to all mankind. Their use as arguments is indirect. They prove the prevalence of prayer on the ground of God's rewarding all obedience by blessings appropriate to the form of obedience. "*The hand of the diligent makes rich.*" "*Blessed are they that hunger, for they shall be filled.*" Thus is there an appropriateness in each reward bestowed by grace to the form of obedience rewarded. And it is obvious that the appropriate reward to prayer is a bestowment of the blessings sought in prayer. There are, also,

2. **Promises to prayer,** lavished in prodigal bounty like the rich fruits of the earth, springing up through all these glorious fields of revealed truth and grace. "*Ask, and it shall be given you.*" "*Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*" "*He will regard the prayer of the destitute.*" "*He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.*" On these no comment need be offered. They are the promises and pledges of the Eternal God. What more can human faith require?

3. **The doctrine of prayer.** It is connected in Scripture with the Trinity. The Father is represented as on a throne of grace. This, of course, is figurative, but real. It is expressive of his feelings, arrangements, and moral attitude toward men. When you hear of the throne of judgment you understand that our Creator will deal with us as a judge. When you read of the mercy-seat you may regard him as hearing prayer. The Holy Spirit is represented as interceding for us by creating within our hearts the desire to pray, and teaching us how to address the Most High. The Son is represented as interceding in heaven for us.

This is the scriptural doctrine of prayer. And it evidently involves the fact that God regards prayer as an important exercise on our part.

4. **The history of prayer** is among the most interesting portions of the Bible. It is one of the many features in which that wondrous book stands entirely apart from all other books. It is a constant display of the condescension and kindness of God. And it is well worthy of remark that with the record of the greater part of the prayers there described, the answer to the prayer is likewise recorded. Prayers, and answer to prayer, as much distinguish the lives of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Daniel as any other events. Jacob was named Israel because he prevailed in

prayer in a princely manner. Samuel, Elijah, Hezekiah, [and] David called on the Lord for special blessings, and the blessings were granted.

The case of Elijah is cited in immediate connection with the text. And to encourage our faith, it is mentioned that he partook of the infirmities common to our nature. All the requests made to Christ when on earth were prayers, and none that was proper in its nature was refused. And in the Book of Revelation the power of prayer is strikingly presented. After John had seen incense preserved in golden vials before the throne, as a symbol which taught him that prayer long unanswered is still not forgotten in heaven, he then saw this vision (8:3-5):

An angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand.

Now, these long-remembered prayers are about to be answered; and what is the consequence? They had prayed for the overthrow of superstition, ignorance, and oppression. And now the angel takes the censer and fills it with fire from off the altar and casts it into the earth: "*And there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings, and an earthquake.*" Men everywhere saw the lightnings and heard the thunders, but probably few of them suspected how much the prayers before the throne had to do with them.

We must now briefly illustrate the other principle in the text:

III. THE EFFICACY OF PRAYER IS PROPORTIONED TO ITS FERVID ENERGY.

The Holy Spirit energizes the human soul in prayer. He kindles a holy fire, but it is on the altar of the heart. He produces groanings, but they are described as those "which cannot be uttered." There are traces throughout the sacred volume of these deep movements of the soul, these unutterable groanings.

Then there are many manifestations of the energized prayer symbolically represented, as in the wrestling of Jacob; and [also] directly described, as in the praying of him whose "*sweat was, as it were, great drops of blood falling to the ground,*" who, in the days of his flesh, "*offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears, unto him that was able to save him from death.*"

We instinctively feel that the highest degree and the strongest expression of approbation belongs to the highest forms of character. But, as already noticed, there is no more distinctive exhibition of the highest form of religious character than the habit of fervent and earnest prayer. It is connected with the most thorough conquest of that enslavement to sense which is the curse and degradation of man. It shows a mind living in the precincts of the world of light. It is a conquest over that indolence and brutal sluggishness which mark our debased enslavement to an infirm and earth-born body. The energetic prayer shows that the soul has caught at least a glimpse of the heavenly glory, breathed the pure breath of a heavenly atmosphere, enjoyed communion with its divine Saviour, burst for a moment its accursed

bonds, and now it cries, *"My soul thirsts after God in a dry and thirsty land, where no waters be."*

Now there is an innate sense of propriety and justice which would incline us to expect that God would put some signal mark of his approbation upon such a character, rather than upon a worldly and a half-worldly character. We should expect to see him admit such a soul nearer to his presence, giving it more marks of his approbation and showing that he feels, as we do, increasing sympathy with those who have increasing attachment to the objects and persons we most esteem.

Some prayers are unseasoned wood on the altar, and unprepared incense in the censer. There is more smoke than fire, more simmering and smoldering than flame. There have been no pains to dry the wood and the frankincense, and hence so many perform the service at the altar unskilfully. *"Let my prayer,"* said one who knew his privilege, *"let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice"* [Psalm 141:2]. There was something of real value burning on that altar. A precious life was there immolated; a lamb was consumed; the flame, like a spirit, lifted up the sacrifice and carried it to God; the cloud of incense mounted and bore its sweet odor to the skies.

Such is prayer,--"the effectual, fervent prayer, the inwrought prayer of the righteous man." It burns on the heart as God's holy altar. It consumes the idols of the heart. It makes a sacrifice of every interest and every faculty. There is a life given up there,--"a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." And is it not probable that God will accept such sacrifice?--that he will signally express his approbation of a prayer which is wrought in the soul by the gracious power of his own Spirit, who thus "makes intercession for us"; and wrought in the soul, too by our own earnest endeavors to learn to pray, and to be ready to pray?

O, yes. It must be that there is a peculiar power and prevalence in this energized, inwrought prayer above that of the sleepy, careless, half-hearted praying that is the fruit of no effort, neither of the Holy Spirit nor the human spirit, but the drowsy task performed under the lash of conscience. It must be that God has an ear for the cry of the humble, the needy, and the importunate, while "the rich he sends empty away."

Look then into the Scriptures and see how this doctrine of degrees enters even into this economy of grace, where the idea of human merit is discarded. It affects the responsibilities of men. *"Where much is given, much will be required."* It affects the actions of men. *"He that sows bountifully shall reap bountifully."* He that "gained five talents" has "five cities," while he that gained "ten talents" has "ten cities" as his reward. Solomon asked earnestly and supremely for the best thing, and it was given as a man never had it; and all inferior things were added. Abraham, at his first prayer for Sodom, had the salvation of the city promised on the condition of there being fifty righteous persons in it. And the more he prayed the more he was emboldened, and the more favorable conditions he obtained. Who knows but he might have saved Sodom for his own sake alone, as an interceding child of God, if his faith had dared go so far? Christ distinctly shows us that the widow gained her cause before the unjust judge simply through this feature of her prayer. It was energized, pervaded with desire and purpose, with will and patience and power. *"The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."*

Then there is great folly in despising prayer. Many persons regard praying as a mark of weakness, and especially do they so look upon men meeting together for the express purpose of praying. Few, however, go so far as to affirm that it is an indication of weakness in a father to assemble his family daily for the purpose of worshipping God. But "a weekly meeting of men for prayer is too insignificant an employment for sensible people." Creature, do you know that your Creator condescends to be present there, and to hear with interest those praises and supplications? And who are you that you should despise it? Sinner, you will pray somewhere. The day is hastening when you will call for help. Proud reasoner, who are you that lays down rules for God's intercourse with man?

Prayer is the highest form of human power. It is power over the Almighty who says, "Take hold upon my strength." It reaches his providence and his Spirit. It affects time and eternity. It is the best guardianship we can exercise over our own interests and families, the church, the nation, and the race. There have been no men of greater power than Abraham, Jacob, and Daniel. When you see a mighty orator rising before a body of senators and rolling back the tide of unfriendly feeling which had been excited toward him and his state, you regard it as an exhibition of great power. I will show you a greater exercise of power. When the cloud of divine vengeance was ready to burst on guilty Israel, Moses stood alone and held it up, staying those storms of wrath. That is power indeed.

Here is indicated the source of weakness in the church: We have not yet learned to pray. I mean, we do not exercise the higher kind of prayer nor understand the work of intercession. Luther used to pray for three hours each day. When the Wesleys were on the field they were absorbed in details of work, but in the preparation for that work they were mighty in prayer. Paul prayed "without ceasing" to the close of his life. To prevail with men we must prevail with God, as Israel did. When the true church shall have come, nothing will more distinguish her than her praying. When Satan's kingdom is about to fall, our present style of praying will have come to be regarded as very infantile.

Sermon VIII, "Effectual Prayer," in *Discourses, Doctrinal and Practical* (Boston: S. K. Whipple and Company, 1857). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.