

*Sermons by*  
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Sermon IV

**"Our Lord's Example in Prayer"**

***"And it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, that when He ceased one of His disciples said unto Him, Lord, teach us to pray, even as John also taught his disciples."***

**Luke 11:1**

Dr. Samuel Johnson once observed that "to reason philosophically on the nature of Prayer was very unprofitable." He may have meant that Prayer is so practical--at once so obvious a need, so sensible a relief, and so proved an instrument--that any reasoned defence of it is unnecessary. More probably he was expressing the conviction that if a man feel no instinct, no inner urgency to pray, mere argument shall never draw him near it. After all there is but one external attraction to Prayer; and that is example. Where the wisest may fail to argue us into the practice of it, the sight of a wise and a strong man upon his knees starts in us some impulse to learn his secret, and may in the end draw us down by his side.

Now, thank God, the high places of our national history bear many such examples. Put aside priests, ministers, all whose professional duty it is to lead their fellows in prayer, and take men of action, business and affairs. Take men of the world, in the best sense of the word, like Sir Walter Scott; heroes of literature like Scott and Johnson himself; men of research like Clerk Maxwell or Faraday; statesmen like Lincoln or Gladstone; or soldiers like Gordon and that group of soldiers and rulers whom India trained to greatness in the early years of our late Queen's reign<sup>1</sup>: Conolly and Stoddart, the martyrs of Bokhara, the Lawrences, Edwardes, Havelock and many another, all of them men whom constant duty and much experience of danger had taught to be very jealous in their choice of the weapons of life. That they believed in prayer and used it means that they had the secret of making it play a strong part in their sincere and strenuous lives. To them prayer was real, practical, indispensable. And their example, I repeat, at least prompts us to ask how they found it so, and what was their secret?

I believe that we shall learn that secret best by seeking where they sought it--in the life of Christ Himself. In His case also, as our text tells us, it was example which told: *It came to pass, as He was praying, that one of His disciples said unto Him, Lord teach us to pray.* Let us look then at the Example of our Lord in Prayer.

We shall see that this consisted mainly in three phases of His practice of prayer: one of which gives us the underlying reason and motive of prayer--that God is our Father; and the other two the practical meaning of prayer--that it is, on one side the real moral battle of life, and on the other the renewed enlistment and consecration of our wills to that warfare.

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<sup>1</sup> The lives of many of these will be found in a book, which is too little used by, or for, the youth of this generation-- Sir John Kaye's *Lives of Indian Officers*.

But before we take up these three aspects of our Lord's example, we ought to remember that we have one motive and duty in Prayer in which our Lord cannot be our example. He who included all men under sin, and taught them to pray confessing their guilt and beseeching pardon, never for Himself used the language of confession. Christ felt the burden of sin as neither the best nor the worst of us ever felt it; but this was the sin of the world and not His own. Which of us, however, needs an example here? If we are alive and awake and dealing honestly with ourselves, there is not one of us but day by day must feel himself bowed to his knees before God with the conscience of his guilt and the need to pray for pardon. *If any man say that he has no sin, he deceives himself and the truth is not in him.*

## I.

The first point of our Lord's Example in Prayer is that He based all Prayer on the Fatherhood of God.

The Gospels give us many of the prayers of Jesus, and I think I am right when I say that there is not one which fails to address God as the Father. Again, when He gave His disciples the Model Prayer, He taught them to begin by saying, *Our Father which art in Heaven.* And when He strove to show them what Prayer is, He drew His illustrations from earthly fathers and children. So with His Apostle Paul, who *bowed his knees unto the Father, of whom every family in Heaven and earth is named* (Eph. 3:14); and to whom the Spirit of Prayer *which Himself makes intercession for us was the Spirit of adoption whereby we cry Abba Father* (Rom. 8:26, 15). And so with John, for when he writes the following words of prayer to God, it is after he has set God before us as the Father: *And this is the boldness which we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will he hears us* (1 John 5:14).

In this very simple and obvious reason for prayer we find our answer to all the intellectual objections which are usually brought against it. You know the fashion of them. One has heard them from secularist platforms, from philosophic writings, or oftener, I dare to say, rising as questions from the restlessness of our own minds. Such as: What is the use of telling One, who knows all things, what He knows already? What is the use of laying before the All Merciful, who must have anticipated them, our needs and our troubles? What is the use of seeking to change the will and purpose of the Most Wise? And so forth. I need not multiply instances; for our own hearts, as I say, frequently suggest them with a cogency no other's voice can imitate.

Well, all such objections to Prayer are at once met, overthrown and dissipated by the faith that God is our Father. For (as Christ has shown in the chapter from which our text is taken) just as natural as it is for our children to come to us with their wants, their troubles and their tasks, with their plans and hopes, with their wonder and perplexities, so natural is it for us to pour out our hearts to the Father of our spirits with the full tale of all we suffer, hope and dare. Prayer is not the effort to tell our God what He must know already. Prayer is not the presumption that He does not feel for us far more than even we feel for ourselves. Prayer is not the attempt to change His wise and loving will.

On the contrary, Prayer is the unburdening of our heavy hearts where we know they have been fully anticipated by the yearnings of an infinite compassion; the laying of our perplexities towards a Light which we know must arise upon them, and till it comes, will

send peace that they may be borne; the lifting of our sin to a Love which we know seeks to pardon us, and whose pardon is therefore our most just as it is our most eager hope; the struggle of our will to be one with His will and of our mind to enter in His mind. That is Prayer. Not the asking of our own way, but of His. Prayer is penitence, confession, aspiration, resignation; the converse of our hearts with the Father; the discipline of our wills to His will; the sincere and strenuous approach of our minds to the mysteries of His. Nothing can keep us back from it or shed a doubt upon its reality if we believe that we are His children and He our Father.

And if Prayer be thus the fatherward attitude of the heart, we understand what Paul meant when he said *Pray without ceasing*. For not only where no word is uttered, but even where thought is not articulate and there is no direct consciousness of His presence--nay (we may dare to say) even where the heart is not sure of Him and errors blind it--, if only we live our lives in patience, if we hold them to duty, if we lay them open to truth and are vigilant against evil, we may make them one long unceasing prayer. *Not every one that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of Heaven; but he that does the will of my Father which is in Heaven* (Matt. 7:21).

All this is simple and obvious. But the other two sides of our Lord's example in Prayer are not so generally noticed or appreciated by us.

## II.

Besides interpreting Prayer as the approach to the Father, Jesus made it the real battle of life. I do not mean the mere preparation or discipline for the battle, but the battlefield and the battle itself.

Perhaps we shall best appreciate this use of Prayer by our Lord if we put to ourselves the following question. In our Lord's life on earth, what were the quietest moments, and on the other hand what were the moments most full of effort, trouble and strife?

The first answer, I suppose, to occur to most of us would be that the quietest moments of our Lord's life on earth were those which He spent alone in communion with His Father in Heaven; and the moments most full of strife and trouble were those He spent in the exhausting work of healing the sick bodies and minds of the multitude--of one of which He said, *Virtue is gone out of me*; in the heavy task of lifting His dull disciples' minds to the purposes of God; in debate with His keen and urgent enemies; and in His encounter at the last with the powers of this world. Such an answer would, I say, probably be the readiest to spring to our minds, and it would appear at first very plausible. Nevertheless it is the exact opposite of the facts of the case.

The Gospels have given us several glimpses into the Lord's moments of prayer. And so far from finding them filled with peace, we discern in many of them effort, struggle and even agony. He who did His wonderful works with a word or even only a gesture, lifted His heart to the Father on His way to them with pain and trouble. He came to the grave of Lazarus with prayer (for He said, when He had come, *Father, I thank Thee that Thou heardest me*), and during that prayer *He groaned in the Spirit and troubled Himself*, and again, *groaning in Himself He comes to the tomb* (John 11:33,38,41).

Again, when the Greeks sought Him at the Feast and He lifted His soul in prayer to the Father, He said, *Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name* (John 12:27,28). And at the last, in the night time in the garden under the trees, when He went forward without His disciples, He *kneeled down and prayed, saying, Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will but Thine be done. And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground* (Luke 22:42,44).

That these were not solitary occasions but that such was our Lord's prevailing temper in prayer, we learn from the Epistle to the Hebrews, which tells us that *in the days of His flesh He offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears* (Heb. 5:7).

Now it was just because our Lord made Prayer the real battlefield of life, and there won His victory, that through the rest of His days below He moved as one who is already conqueror and waits but to gather the spoils of His triumph; achieving His miracles with (as I have said) a word or a gesture, turning His enemies in their controversy with a sentence, bearing in peace the contradiction of sinners against Himself, and at the last facing the majesty of Rome with the utterance, *Thou wouldest have no power against me except it were given thee from above* (John 19:11). Look at these two pictures separated by only a few hours--the struggle in the night time in the garden under the trees, alone with the Father; the peace, the air of victory in the morning, in the sunshine, before the crowds and all the might of Rome itself!

Some few in our day have learned this habit of our Lord--to make prayer the real battle of life. I think especially of General Gordon, a soul who by many ways entered into the secret of his Lord and by none more than this. I have heard that he said more than once, "I had a hard half hour this morning hewing Agag in pieces before the Lord." In his *Letters to his Sister* published after his death, General Gordon's spiritual life is very fully disclosed. Now among those letters we find a number of phrases like the following: "Just before I left I told you about Agag"; "the only way to fight Anak is to keep in union with God in Christ"; "my constant prayer is against Agag, who of course is here and as insinuating as ever"; and so forth.

Now Agag was no Chinaman, nor Turkish pasha, nor Soudanese slave-driver, nor any of those foes of flesh and blood against whom Gordon carved out his great career; but just that old and evil self, which in meeting and overcoming consists the duty, the appointed warfare, the sanctification and growth of character of every one of us. "Agag--catering for notice and praise, 'Look what I have done.'" And it was just because Gordon had thus discovered his Lord's secret of making prayer the real battlefield of life, that through the rest of his deeds he moved with something of his Master's spirit of victory and peace upon him; walking up, as we are told he did in the Chinese war, to the cannon's mouth with only a rattan in his hand; ready at the call of duty to go to the ends of the earth on a moment's notice; and at the last alone, forsaken, destitute, yet laying down his life without fear before the howling mob of his murderers.

Have we learned this secret of Christ, that Prayer is not the mere preparation or discipline for the conflict but the conflict and the struggle itself? Is it not rather because we have failed

to understand this, because we have not seen nor exercised the practical possibilities which lie in prayer when thus regarded, that our belief in it and our practice of it are so wavering and unreal? Why have most men and women who have given up regular prayer (and their number is perhaps greater than we have any idea of), why have they done so? And why have we who are Christians so little faith and constancy in Prayer? For this reason: that we ignore the meaning Christ put into it and fail to see how critical it is and how practical and full of moral potency it may be made.

I do not believe that many men and women cease to pray because of intellectual reasons, or that in every case the cause of their neglect is the consciousness of some cherished sin (without throwing away, which they recognize that prayer for them would be insincere and useless). Some may cease to pray from such motives. But I believe that a great majority slide into prayerlessness by ways far less conscious and thoughtful. Other earnest things in life have risen before them and robbed this of its earnestness. The intensity of it, the practical and serious nature of it has dwindled before the appearance of other duties and other tests in their experience.

For I suppose that in this Christian land we have all been brought up to pray and have kept to the habit through our childhood. Nor is it when we first leave home and go out into the world that we leave it behind. Prayer is often the only bit of home and childhood which we can carry with us, and therefore for a time a young man will cling the more passionately to it, and the habit may even assume a charm he never felt while sheltered and cared for. But then other duties and responsibilities descend and seem to draw the earnestness out of this one: college tasks, business, serious intellectual problems, or the burdens of service to other lives. If we are honest and have a work to do, those will be the first things we think of when we wake. We will be eager to get at them, and anything that comes in the way may grow to be felt as a delay and interruption to our duty.

From such experiences there is nothing which suffers more than Prayer; nothing which men are so plausibly tempted, by the seriousness of life, to regard as in comparison a mere formality, or at most a dispensable luxury. And so they come to hurry over it, or to omit it altogether that they may get to the work of which their minds are rightly full.

All that looks honest and plausible; but it is fatally wrong. He who faces his life--who faces one day of life--without prayer shall be like one who fights with an unbeaten foe in his rear as well as in front of him. But he who follows his Lord and, making Prayer the real battlefield of his life, overcomes there his passions, his fears, his entanglements with evil and the other temptations that beset him, shall move like his Lord unencumbered and unharassed to the nobler issues of life, and achieve them in choice and deed simply and easily.

Do not think that in all this I am pressing upon you anything sensational or exaggerated, anything that is beyond your daily duty or the needs of your daily health. You know, if you are awake, what is in front of you--what calls, what burdens, what possible bearing of pain and disappointment. You know what distractions are certain to come in your way towards these, what besetting sins you have, what temptations are ready to harass and weaken you. Give yourself a little time to realize these alone with God. Summon them to His Presence. Summon them by their right names. Consider their severity, their danger, the power of death to your character which lies in them. Lay to your heart, as Christ did, the awful

difficulty of doing your Father's will in face of them. And then in the full sense of all this, grapple with their power over you. Resolve to overcome them. And by Christ's own promise you shall overcome them then and there; and you shall move through the rest of your life, not untempted indeed, but unencumbered by the baser and more irritating of such enemies, and with much of your Master's peace and power about you.

### III.

But our warfare is not finished by one victory. Through life our warfare is endless, and every victory requires a new enlistment and consecration of our wills to His service. It is in this that the third aspect of our Lord's Example in Prayer consists.

In the first chapter of Mark's Gospel we read that our Lord spent a Sabbath day at Capernaum in teaching and healing. I have already asked you to remember the strain which such work put upon Him; how much of Himself He spent in curing diseased bodies and minds; how with every single case *virtue went out of Him*. And we are to remember, also, that this particularly exhausting day, when *all the city was gathered to His door, and they brought unto Him all that were sick and them that were possessed with devils*, was spent by our Lord (like so much of His ministry) in a sultry and enervating climate at the bottom of that deep trench in which the Sea of Galilee lies nearly seven hundred feet below the level of the Ocean.

Yet after such a day in such a place our Lord did not pass the whole of the following night in sleep. But *in the morning a great while before day, He rose up and went out, and departed into a desert place, and there prayed*. That is, our Lord not only made prayer the battlefield of life, but when the victory came He followed it up with renewed prayer and communion with His Father. Every fresh achievement of power He made a fresh occasion for enlistment to the struggle before Him. Every summit to which His Father lifted Him, He used as an altar for another consecration of Himself to the Father's service.

It is probably owing to our neglect of this part of our Lord's example in prayer that we suffer in our moral lives from so much fickleness, declension and disappointment; that our characters do not steadily progress; and that in particular, on the back of so many victories or attainments, we so often and so suddenly suffer from falls and defeats; or at least, to our disheartening, find ourselves assailed by many temptations which we believed we had overcome once for all. We have forgotten the need for renewed devotion.

Disbanded soldiers make dangerous citizens; and a regiment which has proved itself strong on a foreign field and in face of the enemy has sometimes been known on its return home to give way to disorder and disgraceful excess. Now each of us is a little company of faculties and affections which, so long as danger confronts them and duty takes the aspect of serious battle, hold together firm and vigilant against the foe. So long as the excitement of the conflict is upon them they amply prove their value and faithfulness. But when the strain relaxes, they tend to scatter upon lower aims and even involve us in disgrace. Each of us must be able to look back upon some experiences of this kind, which ought to make him feel the need of following his Lord's example in using every attainment or victory to which he has been lifted as an occasion for fresh consecration of himself to God's service.

I remember some years ago climbing the Weisshorn, above the Zermatt Valley, with two guides. There had been a series of severe storms, and ours was the first ascent for some weeks. Consequently we had a great deal of step-cutting to do up the main *arête*. We had left the cabin at two in the morning and it was nearly nine before we reached the summit, which consisted, as on so many peaks in the Alps, of splintered rocks protruding from the snow. My leading guide stood aside to let me be first on the top. And I, with the long labour of the climb over and exhilarated by the thought of the great view awaiting me, but forgetful of the high gale that was blowing on the other side of the rocks, sprang eagerly up them and stood erect to see the view. The guide pulled me down--"On your knees, Sir. You are not safe there except on your knees."

My young friends, God lifts us all to summits in life--high, splendid and perilous. But these are nowhere more splendid or more perilous than in our youth--summits of knowledge, of friendship, of love, of success. Let us, as we value our moral health, the growth of our character and of our fitness for God's service, use every one of them as an altar on which to devote ourselves once more to His will.

Sermon IV, "Our Lord's Example in Prayer," in *The Forgiveness of Sins and Other Sermons* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1904). Note: The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.