

Plain Village Sermons on the Lord's Prayer

by
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Sermon I
(Lightly Edited for Clarity)

"Continuing instant in prayer."
Romans 12:12

If there is one duty which makes more frequent or more urgent calls upon a Christian than any other, it is that of prayer. It will not be long before anyone who has entered in earnest upon the divine life perceives this. As a natural man, indeed, he owes a debt to his good and gracious God, which he can never acknowledge often enough or be too mindful of. He is dependent on God every day for every thing, being merely the creature of God's hands for Him to do with as He thinks fit.

What then can be more proper or more seemly, than, if for these reasons only, to fall down before the Lord his Maker; and while he acknowledges himself to be one of the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand, to beg for a continuance of that upholding care which has hitherto preserved him? If the air which we breathe, the raiment which clothes us, and the food which we eat day-by-day were all that we received at God's hands, common gratitude would require that we should thank Him for it. And a common sense of our dependence on Him would require that we should request the continuance of it.

But we are not alone in the world. God has surrounded each of us by others of the same form and blood. He has appointed that each of us should be brought into the world not by a sudden and particular creation from Himself, but by the means of parents on whom we are immediately dependent. Thus, as soon as we can discern good from evil we find ourselves placed in a situation in which we have many duties to fulfill towards those about us. These duties continually increase as we grow in years, and it has pleased His good Providence that those towards whom we owe these duties should also be those to whom we are most attached and from whose society we derive the greatest pleasures. Here then, again, is a mercy which requires at our hands a distinct acknowledgment. At the same time it involves a duty which we find ourselves inadequate to fulfill, and thus we are led to look to a higher source for support to enable us and give us strength.

But more than this might be gathered from looking at us merely as the creatures of God's providence. If we cast our eyes around us, we plainly see that those who best fulfill the duties which are required of them by their stations in life are not always the most prosperous. Evil men are often permitted to obtain the mastery and oppress the righteous. We also frequently see that the more the righteous are brought low and in misery, the clearer does their righteous dealing show itself and the more are they purified. Hence we learn to conclude that worldly goods and prosperity are not to be the great objects of desire or of prayer. We have something within us which is better. Worldly goods and prosperity are only employed as the means of trying and preparing us for something after this life. Therefore we are led to conclude that our chief care should be about our *souls*, that superior part of us which is better than the things about us. Here then laid upon us is a fresh set of duties, and far more difficult than any of the former. A mercy

also is conferred upon us, a treasure committed to us, far more precious than the others. Both of these call us to continual acts of drawing near to God, the one for help and the other for gratitude's sake. Therefore, if this were all -- if we merely knew ourselves as the creatures of God's providence -- the duty of prayer would be more and more urgent upon us the more we came to know our state and circumstances. Every fresh discovery of God's dealings with us, and those around us, would open to us new mercies and new duties arising in consequence. Thus, the more knowledge we obtain the more occasion should we have to seek God, both to acknowledge His mercies and to seek His assistance. Now if we add to all this what we must acknowledge to be true -- that our thoughts and actions very frequently are in opposition to God and we are offending Him continually -- it would lead us to Him to obtain pardon for the past and strength for the time to come. It would prevent us from trusting in ourselves but rather, in our actions as well as our being, to see our dependence upon Him.

Consider now a person not only created into life and being by God, but after that creation undergoing a "new birth." Would not such a person's obligation to acknowledge God's mercies and to pray for sustenance in this new life be vastly increased? And if we suppose that with this new life a great increase of knowledge has been made to him, that many ways of God which were dark to him before were now made clear, will it not be the case that by this fresh knowledge the duty of prayer will press more forcibly on him? Suppose also that in this new life the way of prayer was made clear, the difficulties were removed, and the person is brought into a state in which he can have constant access to God with a promise that his requests should always be heard and considered. Would not this also greatly increase the obligation? In short, if the man were in his former life bound to pray, will he not now in his new life be tenfold more bound?

Here is our new life, our new state of duty, mercy, and obligation. God, who brought us out of a state of nothingness and death into the world, has also brought us out of the death of sin and caused us to be born into a life of righteousness. Now, therefore, let us turn and consider the grounds on which the duty of prayer rests.

First, we need continuous sustaining in our new life. As in our natural life, if it were not for God's preservation of us we should be overtaken by death, so in this our spiritual life He must continually hold us up or we shall become like those who have a name to live and yet are dead. For this, then, we must have continual recourse to Him for supplies of His grace. As His providence was the upholding power in the former life, so is His grace is the upholding power in the new life. By grace we were brought into it, and by grace we stand in it. Connected with this is the duty of giving thanks to Him who has thus begotten us anew in Christ Jesus. As far as we are able, let this thanks be in proportion to the greatness of the blessing; that is, earnest, constant, and unfeigned.

These, then, constitute our first matter for prayer in our Christian state, and I cannot sum them up better than in the words which you all know: "I heartily thank my heavenly Father that He has brought me into this state of salvation through Jesus Christ our Savior. And I pray unto God to give me His grace that I may continue in the same unto my life's end."

The second ground for an increased obligation to prayer in the Christian life is that by this new birth we are brought into new relationships and new duties towards others. These circumstances, as before, call for a special acknowledgment of mercy and a special petition for help. In this new state God is our reconciled Father. Before we had fathers of our flesh, and we were in subjection to

them. Now we are brought into subjection to the Father of spirits. All that we owed our earthly fathers -- reverence, love, obedience -- more deeply do we owe to our new Father, just as in proportion the new life to which of His own will He has begotten us is of a higher kind and more glorious than our earthly one. For all this we need His continual help; and because this help is promised to us constantly, and we may always have access to His glorious presence, we are therefore bound to yield Him most humble and hearty thanks for his His fatherly care towards us.

Thirdly, in our Christian life we are bound to pray that the work of our sanctification go forward. An active progress in holiness is required of all who are baptized into Christ, and there can be no progress in holiness without a frequent communion with God -- without realizing His presence and setting Him at our right hand. This is our preparation for our state of glory. Therefore, we should be much occupied right now with the company of Him who is to be the delight and crown of that future state. The more we advance in this blessed progress, the more we see the fruits of faith springing up in our lives and thoughts, and the more we are bound to render humble and hearty thanks to Him from whom comes every good thought and deed.

Next, in our state of salvation we are constantly called into the presence of God to confess and bewail our manifold sins and transgressions against Him. The carnal promptings of our mortal bodies are forever drawing us back from experiencing our spiritual calling in Christ Jesus. Our great spiritual adversary tempts us to disbelieve and distrust our state in Christ, and to look instead to ourselves, as if it were a state that we had to put ourselves into. These backslidings and shortcomings from the simple truth as it is in Jesus need to be often and deeply bewailed before God, and solemnly repented of as unworthy of our state in Christ and a denying of the Lord that bought us.

Now, besides all these calls to prayer on us as members of Christ, there is another which should be as powerful as any. It is the duty of giving God thanks and praise for all His glorious character as shown forth to us in His word. "We give Thee thanks for Thy great glory," are the words we use in our Communion Service after we have fed on Christ, have been admitted within the veil of His flesh, have drunk of His blood, and have become possessed and filled with holy things. The Church, the spouse of the Heavenly King, loves Him for Himself; and every member of that Church will not allow His love to God to stop with gratitude for the blessings he has received, but his love will call him to continual communion with God, to continual searching of His word with prayer.

The Christian's calls to prayer are many and powerful. Surely he who neglects them or thinks lightly of them can hardly deserve the name. We are apt to attach pleasant thoughts to the sound of the bells that call us to our public prayers; and yet there are some who, though they could not bear to stay home when the bells were going for Church, nevertheless care little for prayer. But in the ears of the man who loves His Saviour and values His grace and ready help, bells are always sounding to prayer. When He rises before the daylight to His work and before he leaves his chamber, he hears the call within him, "Come to prayer." When evil thoughts rise in him or ungodly companions tempt him, that sweet sound comes to him again as upon the wind, "Come to prayer." When he meets his family in the evening, safe by God's mercy, there is the well known chime in the midst of them, "Come to prayer." And when he is preparing to lay himself down in the confidence of sleep, the same welcome call is still at his heart's door, "Come to prayer!" By prayer he lives, in prayer he hopes to die. Prayer is his only cordial, his surest medicine, his only key to his best treasure. His Saviour spent whole nights in prayer, and he prays that he may be able to pray like Him.

And now, with all this before you, will any soul in this Church go home and live from day to day and night to night without a prayer or thought of God? I fear many will; for I know too well the hardness of the human heart to think that any thing I can say will break it, unless the powerful arm of God descend to further His Word and give efficacy to it. All of you who really care for the souls of others, here is another great call to prayer -- pray that what we speak in God's name may in His name be received, and by His Spirit rendered fruitful.

You have heard now the *duty* of prayer, how it presses on us as men but how much more forcibly does it press upon us as Christians and inheritors of heaven. I hope, if God spare us, to set before you next Sunday the efficacy of prayer, and both these discourses will be a preparation to explain to you the divine prayer which our Saviour has given us.

Meanwhile I earnestly beseech you, as one who very deeply cares for your souls, to lay to heart what I have said. Let those who pray be more constant and more earnest in prayer, remembering how it is their refuge and strength in all circumstances. And let those who do not pray -- I tremble to say it -- seriously consider what an awfully dangerous state they are falling into. It is no less than that of rejecting the salvation into which they are brought by Christ. Let them begin today, with humble acknowledgment of their grievous omission and cries for forgiveness and grace for the time to come, this their bounden but neglected duty -- that of prayer.

"Sermon I" in Henry Alford, *Plain Village Sermons on the Lord's Prayer and Beatitudes* (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1846); lightly edited for clarity by Carol Morgan.