

# *Plain Village Sermons on the Lord's Prayer*

by  
Henry Alford

## Sermon II

**"Ask, and it shall be given you."  
St. Matthew 7:7**

I endeavoured last Sunday morning to prove to you, and impress upon you, the duty of continuing instant in prayer: how it bears upon us as men, as the creatures of God's providence; but how much more forcibly it bears on us as His creatures of grace and the new birth, inasmuch as our obligations to be fulfilled are greater, our causes of thankfulness more numerous and of a higher order, and consequently our need of assistance greater also. Now I need but refer to what I then said, to make it clear, that even if prayer were nothing but the performance of a required duty, if it were attended with no results, but were merely a simple act of obedience to God, it would not lose any of its claims to our observance, but would retain them all in full force.

But now I am to enter on another branch of my subject, and to shew you that not only are we bound to pray because God has required it of us, but also because our own best interests demand it; that not only is prayer the performance of a duty and an act of obedience, but an appointed means of acquiring blessings from the Giver of all good. And then surely, if I can make this manifest to you, the ties which bind us to God in this matter will be incalculably strengthened, and it will appear not only to be our bounden duty, but also our chief interest to continue instant in prayer. I have chosen to head our meditation on this subject with a direct promise of our Blessed Redeemer, in Whom alone and through Whom any prayers can be received by God, "Ask, and it shall be given you;" because He who knows what is in man, knows also the mind of God; and therefore has a full right and power to make such a promise; because He is our great Head and our Master, and our common bond of union, in whom we live and move and have our being; and therefore we are bound to receive such a promise from Him in full confidence of its performance.

Now I am fully aware that at the very outset I shall have to meet an objection which the natural heart is apt to raise against prayer. Some of you will say to me, you tell us much about the duty of prayer and its efficacy: -- but you never can make me think that anything we can say will persuade God one way or the other -- what He sees fit to give us for our souls' good He will give us, and what He sees fit to withhold from us He will withhold, whether we tell it to Him or not. Now I mention this objection, because it is one that I have very often heard made, not because I wish to suggest objections to you.

You remember in my last discourse on this subject, that I spoke to you of two distinct births we have undergone, and two distinct lives that we have been brought into -- and I shewed you how much likeness there was between our wants and our duties in each of them; only that our spiritual birth and the life which follows it, was of a higher order than the other, accompanied with wants which lie deeper in our nature and duties which are more difficult to perform. I shewed you that the upholding power is God's providence in our natural life, and His grace in our Spiritual life, and that so near is their resemblance that for all the circumstances and operations in the first, we may find corresponding ones in the second.

Now let us see how your objection will apply to our duties as creatures of God's *providence*. You say, that God will give us what He thinks fit, and withhold what He sees bad for us, whether we take any means for it or not. How is it then that we see men from morning till night labouring for their daily bread? Why do not they sit still in idleness and trust that God will bring it to them? but we see they do not -- and I suspect that we should think the person beside himself who did. You see then that your objection is one which does not influence men in their actions; if you go and tell a man it is of no use for him to work, that God will take care of him, he will not listen to you, but will rise up tomorrow morning and go to his work as usual.

Now in the life into which you were admitted when you were brought to be baptized, as we have said, your wants lie deeper -- your food is of a sort more difficult to be obtained; and you yourselves can surely furnish me with the conclusion of my sentence, -- *your labour must be therefore greater*. Prayer in your spiritual life answers precisely to labour in your natural one. In the same way as God has appointed in the order of His *providence* that you should go and labour with your hands and receive your bodily sustenance on account of your labour, exactly so has He ordained in the dispensation of His *grace* that you should go and pray and receive your spiritual sustenance on account of your prayer. If it be madness to neglect the labour in the one case, it is madness also to neglect the prayer in the other: and so much the greater madness of the two in proportion as your spiritual life is more important, more worthy your care, more glorious than your natural one. Now God is not a master who defrauds His servants; He who said "*the labourer is worthy of his hire*," also has said, "*ask, and it shall be given you*." If then men, being evil, yet give to those who labour for them the meat that perishes, much more shall our heavenly Father give to them that ask Him the meat that endures unto everlasting life.

Having shewn to you then the reasonableness of prayer; that it is just as reasonable to pray as *Christians*, as it is to labour for our daily food as men; and that we may just as reasonably look for an answer to prayer in the one case, as for that which our labour has procured in the other: we will now go on to notice a few of the methods in which our souls are fed and refreshed by prayer.

First, then, it is a direct method of fetching down blessings from God, "ask, and it shall be given to you." But then take good heed how you understand this; remember, it is spoken to you as members of the spiritual life, as branches of the vine, Christ -- as persons whose anxieties and whose requests are concerning the wants and necessities of that spiritual life. "Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name," says Christ, "I will do it;" that is, whatsoever ye shall ask as members and parts of Me; as named by the same Name that I am named with, I will do for you; or, as it is elsewhere expressed, it shall be done for you of My Father which is in heaven.

Now this is a point which requires particular explanation, and I would illustrate it in this way. It is very clear that in our natural lives we all labour for the means of preserving life and making it better and more prosperous. We have all a pretty clear notion of the sort of things which will tend to do this; such as increased means, better fare, and the like. And we never hear of such a thing as a man labouring for the means of *destroying life*, -- it is impossible he should, unless he be a madman, who cannot distinguish what is good for him from that which is evil. And if we should see such a one, we should not furnish him with the destructive materials surely, but should place him under the care of others who know better than he does what is his interest.

Now, although we are not so blind as to labour for what will tend to destroy our natural lives, we

are very often so blind as to pray for what would destroy our spiritual life. "The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." In being brought into the light of Christ, we are like persons led out of a dark place into excessive brightness, -- our eyes are dazzled, and we cannot discern things clearly, our state is one above our nature, and no wonder then if we go wrong in it and stumble. Therefore it is that we are very apt to pray for things which are hurtful to our spiritual lives.

But yet you say it is promised, "Ask, and it shall be given you;" very true, but do you not clearly see by what follows, to whom, and with what meaning, this is spoken? Our Saviour goes on to say, "What man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will give him a stone? or if he ask a fish will give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him." You see all the things spoken of are good things, things necessary to the support and well-being of the natural life in one case, and the spiritual one in the other. Prayer, then, is a direct means of fetching down blessings from God, and as such it never has failed and never can fail, for nothing can be called a blessing which does not conduce to our good. Observe the direct promises which God has given respecting this point. He has declared He will be found of them that seek Him with all their heart, that He will fulfill the desire of them that fear Him; He will hear their cry and save them: that they who seek Him shall not want any good thing -- that whatsoever we ask in prayer, believing, we shall receive. There is nothing beyond the reach of prayer: even if it be in heaven in God's treasure house, prayer can ascend and fetch it. Are we distressed, outwardly or spiritually? Prayer shall relieve us. Are we in need? Prayer shall supply us. Are we in sorrow or sadness? Prayer shall comfort us. Are we in doubt and darkness of mind? Prayer shall satisfy us. Are we in temptation? Prayer shall help and strengthen us.

Secondly, prayer is an instrument by which good is worked in us. Besides the direct answer promised and vouchsafed to prayer, it has a beneficial and blessed effect upon ourselves; God by it conveys spiritual light into our minds. When we retire with God into our closets alone, and lay bare our souls to the bright shining of His countenance, which is ten thousand times more glorious than the sun, how can they be otherwise than overflowed with a flood of that heavenly light -- yea, and warmed too with the comfort of His presence.

By prayer all holy dispositions of soul and resolutions of practice are nourished and encouraged, all pious affections excited and quickened. By prayer alone can the love of God be kept alive and vigorous in our hearts, or a constant reverence and awe of Him, and sense of His presence maintained: every moment stolen from prayer is a step back from God's love and fear. By prayer alone can our faith be strengthened and exercised, or our hope enlivened; or, that taste for and relish of divine things begotten and kept up, by which our thoughts are purified, and our lives sanctified. In prayer alone can strength be acquired to subdue our bad inclinations, to restrain our sensual appetites, to compress our irregular passions. In short, prayer is the great bulwark against sin, and safeguard of our spiritual life.

Thirdly, prayer is a most high privilege and advantage to us. The being allowed to fly to so great a God and so kind a Father, to unbosom all our cares, all our wants, all our sorrows, all our joys to Him, to Him who knows all that is best for us, who is our only true and perfect friend, -- how blessed a thing it is, and of how great a price should it be to us. We are apt to think those in a high and enviable situation, who sometimes have the ear, and enjoy the presence of kings and princes; but what is this compared to our condition, who always are allowed the audience and presence of

the great King of all the world?

In Scripture, in history, in our own experience and memory, examples are not wanting of the efficacy of prayer. By prayer, Abraham, when the Lord spoke to him of the destruction of Sodom, prevailed that for the sake of ten righteous the city should be spared. By prayer, Moses, when Israel was sore vexed by their enemies, got for them the victory from God, his hands being held up in prayer till the going down of the sun. By prayer, Joshua obtained that the sun should stand still till the enemies of the Lord were overtaken and punished. By prayer, Hannah, when she poured out her heart in great bitterness of soul, obtained a son from the Lord. By prayer, Elijah, a man subject to like passions as we are, earnestly besought that it might not rain; and it rained not upon the earth by the space of three years and six months: and he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit. By prayer, Elisha raised up the son of the Shunamite when he stretched himself over him and said, "O Lord, I beseech Thee, let this child's soul come into him again." By prayer, David, when he had grievously sinned in the matter of Uriah, besought God, and the Lord forgave the iniquity of his sin. And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Hezekiah, and Manasseh, and Daniel, and Jonah, -- who through prayer obtained deliverance from the jaws of death, were brought out of prison and distress, were preserved from the mouths of the lions, and were shewn things to come.

Need I, after recounting so many instances of answered prayer, repeat to you the promise, "Ask, and ye shall receive," and press upon you, as I did before, the duty, so now, the exceeding benefit and blessed effects of prayer? Need I tell you what a treasure you are throwing away by neglecting it -- how you are despising your spiritual state of salvation in Christ, and going near to fall away from it, by thus omitting to nourish it and improve it? Need I say how you are showing contempt of God, by not availing yourselves of the rich treasures which he has set before you?

Let prayer be your constant employ, your continual refuge. Draw near in faith, nothing doubting that what is asked in faith, shall surely be done for you of God. This is the way to shew that we believe in God -- by going to him for supplies of grace and strength. This is the way to purify our hearts and lives; for we cannot long and frequently commune with God in prayer, while we incline unto wickedness with our hearts. In God's house, in your families, in your closets, this is your proper employment; and I conjure you, never let a possible opportunity pass, without presenting yourselves here in public before God, -- and never let a day pass in which you have not, both in the midst of your families and in private, sought Him earnestly and faithfully for pardon for the past, and grace for time to come; and thanked Him for His mercies, which are every day renewed to us. Thus shall you be blessed in all your undertakings -- and the more you pray here, the more glorious will be your joy, when there shall be no more prayer, but songs of praise for ever and ever.

"Sermon II" in Henry Alford, *Plain Village Sermons on the Lord's Prayer and Beatitudes* (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1846).