

Sermons on Prayer

by
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Sermon III "Hindrances to Prayer"

*"To will is present with me,
but how to perform that which is good I find not."
Romans 7:18*

We come this morning to consider, as I proposed, my brethren, some of the various *hindrances* which beset us when we would pray, and the best way of overcoming them. These hindrances I am sure we all more or less feel. They should be a great grief and burden to us, and we should make every effort to remove them out of our way. No strange thing is happening unto us when we meet with difficulties. Every child of Adam whose heart has been stirred to pray has frequently to take up the words of the Apostle in my text and say, "To will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not."

Let us not however be discouraged. Every earnest man shall in the end be more than conqueror. "There has no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able." If it is my painful duty now to speak to you of hindrances which you will surely feel, it is also my privilege and happiness to tell you of a triumph in which you too may share. We have but to strive earnestly in the right way and patiently to endure, and the victory will be ours.

The first great hindrance then which we have to face and overcome arises from the nature of our hearts. They are of the earth, earthy, consequently to pray aright is no easy matter. Who among us, dear brethren, has not experienced the difficulty of finding words? Who is not often at a loss to know what to say when he would hold converse with God? It is not, of course, hard to repeat a mere form of words, but this, as we have seen, does not of itself constitute prayer. I speak now of the difficulty of finding words of *our own* -- the true and honest utterances of our hearts, when we kneel to commune with our Father in Heaven.

Whence arises this difficulty? You will anticipate my reply: it arises from the state of our hearts. If they were not deceitful and wicked they would not be a hindrance to us; prayer then would be easy and delightful. If our hearts were not by nature alienated from God we should very well know what to say and how to say it. If we had in our hearts any due sense of our guilt and misery, and danger, we should soon find words to express the desire which we felt to be delivered. If we had any hearty love to God, our feelings would soon vent themselves in words. If you knew yourself to be in a burning house with every prospect of being instantly surrounded by the flames, and you saw a friend at hand who would and could deliver you, verily you would be at no loss for words in which to cry mightily for help. If you knew yourself to be blind, on the edge of a lofty precipice and that a single false step would plunge you headlong to destruction, and if you knew also that there was at your side one who could gently lead you to a place of safety, should you lack words, think you dear brethren, in which to prefer your request? I think not. And the reason is because you would *feel* your need, and when the need is felt it will be uttered.

Thus it is in prayer. If we knew and felt that we were spiritually "wretched and miserable, and poor and blind and naked," and that there is One whose ear is ever open to our cry, One mighty to deliver and to save, words would not be long lacking to us in which to pour out our hearts before Him. If we had any personal love to our Lord Jesus Christ, and love to Him is one of the deepest and strongest feelings of which man is capable, we should readily speak of that love to Him who so graciously accepts it and who "first loved us." Let us be well assured, my brethren, that it is because our hearts are so sinful, cold, perverse and unloving that our prayers are so scanty and feeble. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks;" and very often it is simply from the barrenness of the heart that the mouth keeps silence.

This then is, I think, the first hindrance to prayer -- the state of our hearts. It becomes, therefore, a very serious question: How are we to overcome it?

There is no other way than that of earnestly seeking, by the help and grace of God, for strength to get the mastery over our earthly hearts. On no account must we timidly submit. Here however we seem to be met by another difficulty. We must pray for grace to subdue our hearts, and yet they must, in some measure at least, be subdued before we can truly pray. But let us not be unduly perplexed. A mountain becomes a plain to every earnest man when on his knees. You remember no doubt, my brethren, that miracle which our Blessed Lord wrought on one occasion in the Synagogue on the Sabbath Day, of restoring to a poor man his hand which was withered. The command which our Lord gave him was, "Stretch forth thy hand." Now the man might have urged that his hand was withered, that he had no life in it, that it was quite impossible for him to stretch it forth. But he did not thus argue. "He stretched it forth" at once, and in *making the effort*, the ability came. We read that "it was restored whole like as the other." Let us do the like with regard to prayer. With earnest *effort* by God's grace, the power to pray acceptably will surely come.

Now as we are not ignorant of the nature of our hearts, of their sinfulness and alienation from God, we should strive by His grace to free them from the bondage in which sin holds them, and begin with an earnest determination henceforth to practice watchfulness and self-denial, to give up all self-indulgent habits, and to renounce without reserve everything which stirs up desires plainly springing from our hearts' corruption. The conflict with self will no doubt at times be severe, our sincerity we may be sure will often be put to the test, and we shall probably meet with many a defeat. "Early efforts (it has been well remarked) are for the most part clumsy failures. Repeated trials are the uniform conditions of success."

The work will and must be gradual, but if we seek for the needful grace, it will be sure. If hitherto we have lived lives of self-pleasing or carelessness, it is idle to expect without effort to overcome our hearts and to realize at once the bliss of earnest prayer. We must patiently strive, and watch and wait on the Lord. "They that wait on Him shall renew their strength." Just in proportion to the degree in which we do these shall we find the Holy Spirit of God working effectually in us -- enlightening our minds, strengthening our feeble wills, purifying our affections, subduing our hearts. We shall be able to realize our Father's presence, know ourselves, and consequently be enabled truly to pray.

Bear in mind, too, that it is our peculiar blessing and privilege as Christians that we are not left to ourselves. We are in His Church, in the Kingdom of His grace. The Holy Spirit's grace is covenanted to us; we are not left to fight single-handed with the enemies of our salvation.

Weapons of warfare are not simply provided for us, but put into our hands. "Greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world." By degrees, and through His help shall our earthliness be subdued. "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law, but under grace."

The second hindrance which besets us when we would pray comes from that formidable enemy to all true devotion with whom we have to struggle -- the Devil. He places many difficulties in our way. The conflict which we have to wage with him is severe. He knows how strong even the weakest become when on their knees, and so exerts all his malice and cunning to hinder prayer. You must often, my brethren, have been conscious of his devices, for besides stirring up the corrupt desires of our hearts by his unholy whisperings, there are times when we can hardly fail to see that he is bringing all his efforts to bear on one particular point.

As an example of what I mean, let me ask if when engaged in prayer you have not sometimes been quite suddenly impressed with the necessity of instantly rising to perform some other duty? A fancied necessity has passed before your mind's eye for doing something else, and doing it at once. You feel that it will suffer by delay, and that therefore you must rise to do it and continue to pray at some other time. The moment you are off your knees and set about that which appeared to you such a necessary work, you feel that you are the victim of a snare. It could very well have waited; not the slightest necessity was there for its instant performance. You see this when the mischief has been done, and that the author of this mischief was the Devil. He is the great hinderer, and delights in his work. If he can only keep us from prayer he is content. And many, alas! are content to let him do it. They listen to his crafty suggestions, although our Lord Himself has told us that "he is a liar and the father of it."

Another of his devices when he would keep us from prayer is that we really cannot find time for it. He whispers that it is all very well for those who have leisure, but that for those who have much to do, it is almost out of the question, or at any rate very short prayers are all that can be expected. Thus he is allowed in some sort to quiet the conscience. Knowing the deep humility, hatred of sin, and simple dependence on God which arise in the hearts of all who truly commune with Him, he uses every effort to keep us from prayer. If he can only do this, as I have just said, he is content. He has done his work; he has kept us from God the source of all strength, holiness and peace. Lack of time is one of his favorite excuses. It is just the excuse we like, and many are not slow to avail themselves of it.

Do you ask, my brethren, how you shall overcome this hindrance? How you shall bring to nought all the schemes and devices of the Devil? I reply by pointing you to those words of Holy Writ, "Resist the Devil and he will flee from you; draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh to you." Believe, in the first place, that it is possible to gain the victory over the Devil. Do not for a moment doubt this. The Almighty Spirit who works in us is mightier far than all the powers of hell, and if we be faithful to Him and listen to His teaching and act on His suggestions, He will enable us to bruise Satan under our feet. He will not suffer our foes to triumph over us.

We must, however, be on our guard; we must never allow ourselves to be taken by surprise. The Devil is a very subtle enemy. It is, perhaps his *subtilty* more than his power that we have to fear. You will remember that he "beguiled Eve through his *subtilty*." Let him not beguile us. And he tempted our blessed Lord Himself in the wilderness. Three several [distinct] times was temptation offered and as often rejected. The tempter could not bribe Him, who could look into the mind of the Prince of Darkness and see its subtle and malignant workings. And the record of this

temptation is no doubt intended to teach us that there is the same Almighty strength for us in our hour of trial as that which upheld our Blessed Lord in the days of His flesh. In ourselves, weak and helpless, there is grace and strength for us if we truly seek them. We too may be "strong in the Lord and in the power of His might." When the Devil haunts our hour of prayer with his evil suggestions, let us learn to be prompt in girding up the loins of our minds, and in the might of the Spirit manfully doing battle with him. If we are earnest and sincere the result will be no matter of doubt; we shall not be left alone in the conflict. There is One who has pledged Himself to aid if we look to Him humbly and imploringly for help. There is One who "in that He Himself has suffered being tempted, is able to succour them that are tempted." His right hand and holy arm shall give us the victory. Behold the Devil will leave us and holy Angels come and minister to us instead.

These then are the two chief hindrances which beset us when we would pray -- our earthly hearts, and those devices and suggestions which manifestly proceed from the great hinderer the Devil. There are others arising more or less from the same sources which will occur to you, and which I need not now stay to mention. Let me rather, in conclusion, press home upon you the necessity of overcoming them all, and of steadily acquiring the habit of patiently waiting on God in the exercise of this most blessed duty.

Consider for one moment the solemn issue that is at stake. You need not be told, my brethren, that this present life is the seed-time of a long existence. This consideration of itself should make us pause and determine that all the hindrances which lie in the way of the salvation of our souls shall be met and overcome. Many are so taken up with the cares and business of this world that they neglect the momentous concerns of the next. They do not realize the truth that as they now sow they shall hereafter reap. As a simple matter of fact, they cannot sow to any profit unless they are diligent in prayer. No real growth can take place without prayer, and it is idle to expect it. We all know too that our present life is uncertain in its duration, although such tremendous consequences hang upon the way in which we spend it. Death is a solemn thing even to the most prepared Christian. What must it be to the prayerless? Bear in mind that for the most part men and women die as they live. Be wise therefore in time. It is impossible to conceive the misery of a soul banished forever from God, and from whom hope has eternally fled.

Oh, it must not be so with any amongst ourselves! With God's help resolve, dear brethren, that it shall not. "Lift up the hands which hang down and the feeble knees." Remember for your encouragement that all satisfactory growth is *gradual*. As in nature so in grace, there is "first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear." Be sure that growth is going on, that there is no going back. It is impossible to stand still. We cannot even if we would. If not advancing, we *are* going back. When your spirit is faint and weary, look upward with the eye of faith and forward to the things which shall come to pass hereafter. Every earthly sorrow becomes light and every earthly joy grows dim and tasteless when we ponder on the glory which shall hereafter be revealed. A day, an eternal day, is surely coming when conflict shall cease, death be swallowed up in victory, and tears wiped from every eye. Meanwhile I would animate you with that glorious promise: "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life."

"Hindrances to Prayer" in Samuel Bentley, *Sermons on Prayers* (London: William Skeffington, 1871).