

Sermons on Prayer

by
Samuel Bentley

Sermon V
"Helps to Prayer"
(Part 2)

*"Lead me in Thy truth and teach me;
for Thou art the God of my salvation, on Thee do I wait all the day."
Psalm 25:5*

What an expression of humble, quiet confidence in God are these few words of David! His desire to be led into a deeper knowledge of Divine things, his sure trust in God as the Rock of his salvation, his diligent use of the appointed means -- all these are comprehended in this aspiration of the pious soul of the sweet Psalmist of Israel. Verily he had been taught of God to pray.

And we too, dear brethren, may learn from the same Divine Teacher. Indeed, unless He vouchsafes to teach us we cannot truly pray. He must open our lips, or our mouths cannot rightly show forth His praise. This I trust we have seen from what I have already said on this great subject. But I trust we have also seen that although this is the case, we need not and we ought not to despise any aids to prayer which lie within our reach, and which others mature in years and in piety, and eminent for their attainments in this grace of prayer and supplication, have not disregarded. To God and to God alone be all the glory of true prayer. The desire, the will, the ability to pray -- all proceed from Him. His Holy Spirit first stirs up the desire, then inclines the will, and lastly gives the power heartily to pray. But this fact does not free us from the duty of taking pains with our prayers. For the most part, the grace of the Holy Spirit is given by way of blessing on our own endeavours. Let me then in continuation suggest to you one or two more *helps* to prayer, the employment of which by God's blessing has been found useful.

When, then, you have realized in some measure the presence of God and sought for the aid of the Holy Spirit, let me counsel you as a help to devotion to divide your prayer into separate parts. It is well to avoid mingling together those parts of prayer which should be kept distinct, and moreover which would seem naturally to keep themselves asunder. For instance, do not mingle confession of sin with intercession for others; keep the two distinct. Employ method of some sort in your prayers. Without it your devotions will inevitably become confused and your thoughts distracted. Have then before your mind's eye some plan on which to proceed. The Holy Spirit will work *with* you and suggest; but as a rule, He will not work *without* you. . . It is a good plan to divide prayer into four distinct parts -- distinct in themselves and yet together forming one harmonious whole, namely: confession, petition, intercession, and praise. These divisions are easy and natural. Let me say a few words on each of them.

First, as to CONFESSION:

Now in this our own present personal feelings as to our sinfulness and guilt in the sight of God should be earnestly yet soberly expressed. In our secret chamber we should with open mouth confess to God the sinfulness of our nature, the strong propensity to evil which we know to be

within us, how prone we are to yield to temptation, how difficult it is to stand upright. All this should really be a heavy burden to us. And so as the Holy Spirit convinces us of sin, we shall be led to feel, and consequently to express to Almighty God, intense grief for the depravity of our nature and the sinful rebellion of our hearts -- in short, that we are so unlike Him. St. Paul's feeling will be ours: "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

And then we should turn to the sins which we have actually committed, especially during the last few hours or days. It is well from time to time to confess again to God, with the deepest sorrow and self abasement, any sinful acts in our lives which stand prominently forward and have specially defiled our souls and offended God. So great, alas! is our sinfulness, that it would be simply impossible to count separately each sin. But I fear there are few of us who have lived many years without having some special and wilful acts of sin to confess before God. Our fellow men may not know nor even suspect them, but they are known to ourselves and surely known to God. I desire to judge no man. At the same time, I fear, that if the boyhood and manhood of many were seen by us as they *are* seen by the searching eye of God, there would be found many separate acts of wilful and presumptuous sin which with the deepest humiliation of soul should be openly confessed to Almighty God and mourned over in His immediate presence.

You are doubtless aware, my brethren, that though the Church of England (unlike the Church of Rome) does not encourage, she yet in certain special cases permits, confession to the Christian Minister. If any man "cannot quiet his own conscience, but requires further comfort or counsel," he is permitted to "open his grief" to him who in spiritual things is set over him in the Lord. The object of this permission doubtless is that the Minister may by the aid of the Holy Spirit enlighten, direct, and strengthen that individual conscience, and by the ministry of God's Holy Word guide that individual soul into the paths of a contrite peace.

Ever let us remember that we cannot get any sin blotted out of the book of God's remembrance unless we seek His pardon through the Blood of Christ. I need not tell those who have been led to see their sins in their true light what a terrible scourge is even their hateful memory. But I do solemnly warn those who refuse to drag them to the light of confession before God of the danger which they thereby incur. For sin -- even the greatest -- confessed, mourned over and forsaken, there is for our merciful Saviour's sake full and free forgiveness. So wondrous was the love, so complete the sacrifice, so sufficient the atonement that "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they be red like crimson they shall be as wool." But I can hold out no hope to the careless and impenitent: "He who covers his sins shall not prosper." David's words are: "I acknowledge my transgressions and my sin is ever before me."

And then from acts of sin which we have committed we should turn in our confession to sins of *omission*. How many are the duties which we neglect to perform, or do not perform from the right motive! The slightest amount of consideration will enable any of us to see that the catalogue of Christian duties which are left unperformed by very many is a long one. And we ought to look steadily at the fact that each neglect of duty is sin. The man in the Parable who "hid his talent in the earth" was guilty of a sin of omission. He had done actually nothing; he had simply left undone that which it was his duty to do. He had not squandered the talent committed to him; his sin consisted in the simple circumstance that he had not used it. But what became of the unhappy man (and let us not forget that the Parable was spoken for our learning)? "Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

From Confession we should pass to PETITION.

We are bidden, you will remember, "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to make our requests known unto God." "All things whatsoever (that is all things in accordance with the will of God and the mind of Christ) ye shall ask in prayer, believing ye shall receive." If we ask in faith and in submission to God's will, we shall receive. For spiritual blessings, it is not possible to ask too earnestly or too importunately. We should ask God to grant unto us such a godly sorrow for sin as shall by His grace work in us true repentance and the thorough conversion of our hearts to God. Specially should we seek for an intense hatred of sin itself, for its pardon for Christ's sake, for complete deliverance both from its guilt and power, for grace entirely to overcome our besetting sin -- whatever it may be -- which self examination will have made known to us. And then we might pray for larger measures of the Holy Spirit's grace, and for entire submission in all things to God's will, for deeper humility, more love to God, greater zeal for His glory, and for a more earnest spirit of self denial.

Further still, we should pray for grace to do our duty conscientiously in that state of life to which God has been pleased to call us, and that we may be kept from the evil of the world in which we are living, and enabled to withstand its temptations as well as those of the devil and the flesh. And if we are in any difficulty, trouble or sorrow, we should reverently and humbly lay the matter before God in prayer and ask Him to guide us in the right way, enable us clearly to see what our duty is, and support us with His own right hand. He will assuredly hear us. If we are called to any new duty, or if any fresh circumstances arise, or changes occur in our position in life, we should seek God's guidance and blessing thereon.

Let us not imagine that all these things are too insignificant to be cared for by Him. It is a very low estimate to take of God, to imagine that He can be burdened by listening to the prayers and supplications of any of His creatures. He who "weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance" notes the fall of a sparrow and numbers the hairs of our heads. We may cast *all* our care upon Him who cares for us. Only remember that the important thing in prayer is to be sincere. Endeavour to be thoroughly in earnest. Pray for the gift of a sincere and loving heart. Never mock God by saying what you do not mean. Do not indulge in the expression of wants you do not feel. Weigh every petition in your own mind before you offer it, and do not offer it unless it is your real desire.

Thirdly, turn to INTERCESSION.

Intercession for others is by no means an unimportant part of prayer. Frequent mention is made of it in Holy Scripture and numerous examples are given. We are taught to make "supplications, prayers, *intercessions* for all men." There are some perhaps who think that sinful and worthless as we ought to feel ourselves to be, and as indeed we are, it is presumptuous to intercede for others. The objection is plausible but shallow and untenable. It cannot be presumptuous to do what God has bidden us. We are to "look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." Intercessory prayer may be said to be the highest kind of prayer. It resembles the prayers the Saviour offered in the days of His flesh, and it is that which He now offers before the Throne of His Father in Heaven. "He ever lives to make intercession for us."

And, moreover, intercessory prayer is the most unselfish. On no account then, my brethren, omit intercession when you pray. Intercede with God for those who are near and dear to you, for all

your friends and benefactors. Ask God to bless them. And if you know that any are in some special sorrow or trial, beseech God to comfort and relieve them according to their several necessities, and to give them patience under their sufferings and a happy issue out of all their afflictions. Greatly does it sanctify all earthly ties and friendships when from time to time in the most solemn act of our lives, we mention the names of beloved relatives and friends, and beseech our Heavenly Father to strengthen, comfort and bless them. We should pray also for all who are in authority, and for all who may at any time have done us wrong; for all the sick and afflicted everywhere; for the whole (or sound) state of Christ's Church militant here on earth; for all who minister in holy things, especially for your own pastor.

Here let me remark how great a blessing might God send upon a parish if the hearts of those who lived in it were disposed frequently to intercede with God on behalf of their minister, if they besought God to give him grace at all times boldly to speak the truth unto them, to keep back nothing that was profitable for them, to give to every man his portion of meat in due season, and to declare unto them so far as it is given to man, the whole counsel of God!

I am not however supposing you, my brethren, to be able at every act of devotion to intercede for all to whom I have alluded. I would desire only to press home upon you that the duty of intercession is an important one; and that you ought not to neglect, but rather seek constantly in some measure to fulfil it. We may rest assured that setting aside the fact of intercession being a duty, we shall find our own souls blessed in remembering others at the Throne of grace.

Fourthly, let PRAISE and THANKSGIVING always end your prayer.

It is meet, right, and our bounden duty that we should at all times praise the Holy Name of Him who has done such great things for us. Who can count the mercies he receives? How numerous are our temporal blessings! -- our creation, preservation, education, the health which we enjoy, the strength given us for daily duties, our friends, and all the comforts by which we are surrounded. All these demand constant praise. Praise is a special act of homage for those who fear God. "Ye that fear the Lord (says the Psalmist) praise Him." And again, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord."

But all our temporal mercies are small compared with our spiritual blessings. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (says St. Paul) who has blessed us with all spiritual blessing in Heavenly places in Christ." We should praise and magnify Him who gave His only Son to die for us, and adore the boundless love of that Incarnate Son who gave Himself a ransom for all, and through whose most precious Blood we have redemption. We should with heart and mind offer thanks and praise to Almighty God for all the blessings of this life; but above all for our redemption by Christ Jesus, for all the means of grace afforded us here, and the hope of glory held out to us hereafter. We should say with David, "While I live will I praise the Lord, I will sing praises unto my God while I have any being."

As the last help to prayer which I will mention, let me beg of you to make your prayers *habitual*. Separate acts of devotion, to be effectual, must grow and develop into a habit. We lose much and expose ourselves to temptation when we only pray occasionally. An awful strangeness grows up between our souls and God when we neglect communion with Him. There is a coldness and silence, yea the very silence of death. Make then prayer *habitual*. Patiently and calmly resolve to overcome every difficulty. If at the time which you had set apart for devotion you do not feel

inclined to pray, do not let this disinclination keep you from your knees; and do not stop to reason about it but begin to pray. Do not give way to dulness or sloth. The very reluctance which you perhaps feel may be permitted by God for the trial of your faith and the perfecting of your patience. Let this be the only effect it has upon you. Do not doubt that God will bless your endeavour to converse with Him, and that you will rise successful from the struggle. Ask for grace to pray. In the end you shall be more than conqueror. Let the earnest, yet reverential, desire and purpose of your heart be that of the Patriarch of old: "I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me."

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