

## Chapter XIII

### "On Distractions in Prayer"

by

Edward Bickersteth

When the sun is above the horizon, all the stars which appear so plainly and in such number during the night are no longer visible, and though they are really still in the heavens, they are lost in the blaze of the sun's brightness. This may illustrate a difference often observable between the genuine Christian who is striving to serve God in all things and the merely professing believer who is living in habitual sin. The Christian condemns himself for numberless faults. In every part of his conduct he sees defects more numerous than the stars of heaven. Even his prayers appear full of sins. In them he discovers innumerable wanderings of thought and perpetual distractions. And like the stars at night, these daily infirmities are ever in view. There is no great sin in his life blazing forth so that they are lost to view, as the stars are lost in the more dazzling light of the sun. But the man who is merely a professed believer, on the other hand, whose heart is unchanged and unrenewed, thinks that he performs a meritorious service in the outward worship of God. Even though he never feels one holy inclination, he is not troubled. Did he but watch his heart and know its true state, he would have to say, "*I was on the verge of total ruin in the midst of the assembly and congregation*" (Pr. 5:14).

There are indeed many defects in our prayers. There is often great coldness in our desires, much unbelief in God's promises, and improper ends in our petitions. But there is in all our devotion one principal sin--the wandering of the heart. For the right performance of prayer, it is of main importance *to attend upon the Lord without distraction*, and thus a fuller consideration of this subject may be useful. And if distractions be not entirely cured in this life, yet, like a man who knows not how to swim but who may gradually learn the art so as to keep himself by degrees longer and longer above water, so here, in the matter of prayer, improvements may be continually made. It is possible to be freed more and more from distractions and more and more to rise above those troubling waves.

1. ***Observe the nature of distraction.*** It is the wandering of the heart from God. Some indeed manifest this in public worship by the wandering of the eye, the irreverence of their outward behavior, and unnecessary whispering and greetings. But I would rather dwell on the root of the evil--the wandering of the heart. In the midst of a solemn prayer (whether given by the minister or offered up on his own), the heart will be dwelling on some earthly business or pursuing a vain pleasure. It will be engaged in thoughts of doing good on a subject foreign to the prayer, or be led astray by something relating to the subject of the prayer.

For the watchful Christian, there is a continual internal struggle to worship God in spirit and in truth. He knows the task of raising an earthly mind to heavenly things. He strives not only against worldly thoughts but also against good thoughts which often come unseasonably to hinder him. In carrying on this battle he finds the power of a carnal mind continually sinking him to the dust. He repels idle and wandering thoughts during prayer. He labors against inattention

and perhaps, when all is finished, he has gained but a transient moment of devotion. He returns humbled, abased, and depressed, smiting his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Nothing humbles him more than the defects of his prayers. This is a battle, however, of which the mere formalist is wholly ignorant. His end is gained and his conscience satisfied if he has simply appeared in the house of God, or if he has dutifully repeated his prayers. He thinks this a meritorious service and is well pleased with himself.

It is a good thing when we are deeply affected by this wandering of heart and when we mourn on account of it, for we insult and dishonor God by a slight and perfunctory service, by leaving the worship service with little brokenness of heart and little contrition. How would such conduct towards an earthly superior overwhelm our minds with shame and confusion of face when reflected on in sober moments. For some, almost the whole of their prayers is at times little else than one continued distraction. They have not a single holy thought truly offered up to God during any part of the service. And, alas, if the thoughts of most Christians during their worship were expressed with their prayers, what strange petitions would be found to be offered to God!

**2. *There is great evil in these distractions.*** The more wandering the heart is, the more wearisome the duty, while the nearer we come to God, the more warmth and life and comfort we enjoy. The work of prayer not only ceases while our thoughts wander, but *confessions* made while distracted increase guilt, *petitions* made while distracted only ask for a denial, and *praises* offered while distracted tend to stop the flow of mercy. We make light of distractions on account of their commonness, but God greatly condemns them. A curse is pronounced on those who do "*the work of the LORD [Yahweh] deceitfully*" or negligently (Jer. 48:10). God declares, "*I know the things that come into your mind*" (Ezek. 11:5). Sins in public worship must be peculiarly offensive to the holy God. Solomon says, with marked emphasis, "*In the place of righteousness, iniquity was there*" (Ecc. 3:16).

It is an awful character described by David: "*For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is destruction; their throat is an open tomb; they flatter with their tongue*" (Ps. 5:9). Observe also how this sin agrees with Ezekiel's description: "*So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain*" (Ezek. 33:31).

God has ever shown himself to be jealous respecting those things which concern his immediate worship. Thus we find Nadab and Abihu punished with death for offering strange fire before the Lord (Lev. 10:1,2). We read that Uzzah was smitten with death for touching the ark of God (2 Sam. 6:6). The directions respecting God's worship under the Mosaic dispensation were very minute and particular; which, among other things, may teach us the need of great attention in our approaches to God and the regard which God pays to all our worship. Indeed, as one observes, "It is evidently a gross insult to the glorious God, when praying to him, to quit [leave] him in the midst of our prayers as if we were conversing with an inferior, and to make vain excursions on every side."

**3. *Another thing which should teach us the sinfulness of distractions is that they bear the stamp of hypocrisy.*** It was the reproach of the ancient Church, "*Ephraim has encircled Me with lies*" (Hos. 11:12). Is not this a true description of much of the worship of Christians? You would not like any fellow Christian to know what was passing in your heart during your prayers,

yet being judged by man is a small matter. Now consider, *He who judges you is the Lord!* When we look back on the distractions during our prayers, have we not reason to fear that there are few who ever really pray? Many words perhaps, but very little prayer. These things should lead us to more highly value the doctrine of free justification through the blood of Christ, to more deeply prize and more earnestly seek the aid of the Holy Spirit, to more truly rely on the Saviour's intercession, and to more earnestly long to be in that blessed kingdom where we shall serve our God without weariness or wandering thoughts.

**4. *We will now mention some hints that may, by the help of God, assist you in avoiding distractions.*** There may be an infirmity arising from the state of bodily health or constitution which timid and anxious Christians, who are most apt to be troubled by their wanderings in prayer, should not lose sight of in judging themselves. Nevertheless, the *general causes* of our distractions are the power of Satan, the remaining strength of corrupt nature, and our unbelief in God's promises. The born-again Christian has contending parties within him--the *old man* and the *new man*. Distractions mainly arise from the weakness of faith, the strength of sin, and the temptation of Satan. Let us remember our entire dependence on God. Let us know our own weakness. We are not sufficient in ourselves, but the Saviour's *grace is sufficient for us*. With these things duly impressed on our minds, we can seek to overcome this evil in his strength.

Send up fervent petitions for divine assistance, especially when you first find your thoughts wandering. This is an effectual help. It engages the power of God against the power of Satan and sin. The Psalms are full of suitable expressions that may be used with advantage. *"My soul clings to the dust; revive me according to Your word"* (Ps. 119:25). *"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me"* (Ps. 51:10,11).

Determine to strive against wandering thoughts. *"Resist the devil and he will flee from you"* (James 4:7). Are you not, in general, going carelessly to the worship of God as a matter of habit and custom, without much thought of engaging your heart to approach him? This seems to be a too general case from the inquiry, *"Who is this who pledged his heart to approach Me? says the LORD [Yahweh]"* (Jer. 30:21). The heart must be engaged to serve God. We should resolve with Jeremiah, *"Let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven"* (Lam. 3:41). Before you enter on this holy duty, pause and pray with David, *"Unite my heart to fear Your name"* (Ps. 86:11); as if he had said, "I find my heart divided and my thoughts dissipated. Gather in all my wandering affections. May they be fixed on one great object. May they all be united in this single act that is before me."

Seek to gain a spiritual mind. *"For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace"* (Rom. 8:6). When we remove a particular distraction, we are only cutting off a leaf or twig from this evil tree. *"O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, that you may be saved. How long shall your evil thoughts lodge within you?"* (Jer. 4:14). Until the heart is washed from sin by the blood of Jesus and the grace of his Spirit, vain thoughts will be sure to lodge or take up an abode in you and mingle with all you do. The heavenly-minded Christian, whose heart is continually with God, finds it comparatively easy to keep it more closely fixed on him in the particular act of prayer. But if you are under the full influence of the carnal mind, it is utterly impossible that you can offer spiritual worship. *"You must be born again"* (John 3:7). You need an entirely new heart. When you gain that, you will have better hope of attending

upon the Lord without distraction.

Men of the world are not distracted about their worldly business but will pursue it with all fixedness and intention of mind--hour after hour, day after day, year after year. They have an earthly mind and love earthly things. Seek to have a spiritual mind and then you will thus pursue spiritual things. All the lines of your affections should unite here, all the radii of the circle should meet in this center--in a fixedness of heart on God in his worship.

Persevere in prayer notwithstanding distractions. In the path of duty every obstacle gives way to the faith of the Christian. When the Israelites were come to the Red Sea and to the waters of Jordan, they were directed to go forward. It might have been objected, "If we go forward, shall we not be drowned?" But still their duty was to go forward. And so should we go forward in the path of a plain command, leaving to God the removal of all obstacles. The reluctance and the discouragement related to prayer will be overcome in the performance of the duty. Patience is a grace as necessary in devotion as in afflictions.

The difficulty of praying without distraction, and the fact that distractions do mingle with our holiest services, should inculcate many practical lessons, such as humility, brokenness of spirit, entire dependence on Christ for righteousness and strength, pleadings for the influence of the Spirit, and a longing to be in heaven--where all our services will be pure and holy. That Christian's prayer is not lost which produces any of these effects. Nay, if a prayer tainted with distractions does nothing more than deeply humble us, it may be one of our most profitable prayers.

And when our distractions are lamented and our desire after spiritual blessings unfeigned, it may encourage us to remember that we pray to a Father. A little child often finds a difficulty in expressing its wants to an earthly father. Yet he, being desirous to meet the wishes of the child, will be patient in discovering and supplying those wishes. So shall our heavenly Father *"give good things to those who ask Him"* (Matt. 7:11).

Our incapacity, indeed, is not physical but moral. Yet God, notwithstanding these many sins, considers those who trust in his Son as children, and pities them, and spares them. *"They shall be Mine, says the LORD [Yahweh] of hosts, on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him"* (Mal. 3:17).

Chapter XIII from *A Treatise on Prayer* by Edward Bickersteth (London: Seeley and W. Burnside, 1836). **Note:** Liberty has been taken for some light editing and paraphrasing. The NKJV has been used for quotations.