

# *Sermons by the Late Rev. David Merrill*

## **Sermon IV "Secret Prayer"**

***"But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet ; and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret ; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."***

**Matthew vi. 6**

The design of the sermon on the mount is to explain and illustrate Christian character, so that no man might mistake the nature of Christianity or the spirit of Christ's kingdom. After his temptation Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," "And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judea, and from beyond Jordan." This immense multitude needed some certain information as to the nature of this kingdom, and the character of its subjects. "The kingdom of heaven is at hand," and the natural inquiry was, What sort of a kingdom is it ?

The sermon on the mount is the answer to this inquiry. In these three chapters Jesus has shown the nature of that kingdom, and the spirit and temper of its subjects; and so plain that "the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein." All its subjects are poor in spirit, and meek, and pure, and peaceable. Reviled, they revile not again; persecuted, they suffer it. The law of God is in their heart--a law which requires purity of motive as well as propriety of conduct. They are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, as their conduct is the acting out of that love which is the fulfilling of the law. Devotion to God is combined with kindness to those who are made after the similitude of God.

There was no command to give alms. This was a duty which nature itself taught, and which all acknowledged, and as to the outward form, many regarded. His command is not to enforce the act but to regulate the manner and the motive. "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them; otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore, when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do, in the synagogues, and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily, I say unto you, they have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth; that thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, himself shall reward thee openly." The trumpet was sounded professedly to call the people together, to give notice to the needy that distribution was to be made. But it answered the purpose also of proclaiming their generosity. They saved the trouble of seeking out the distressed and purchased the credit of liberality at a cheap rate.

So with regard to prayer. It is taken for granted that all pray, or at least acknowledge the obligation. He says nothing, therefore, to enforce the duty but only to regulate the manner and spirit of prayer. When thou doest alms, let it not be to gain the credit of liberality or to appear generous to men. If that be your object, you have your reward. It is done to men, and in their praise and approbation you have your reward--you can expect nothing of God. When thou prayest, let it not be to gain the credit of talents, or sanctity, or of deep experience, or deep humility. Such an exhibition men may praise, and exclaim, "How devout,"

"how humble," or "how heavenly"; but God abhors it. Men may call it an elegant prayer, while it is a smoke in his nostrils.

This is not designed to forbid public alms-giving or public prayer, but ostentation and display. What is good in deed ought to be good in manner and good in motive. The disciples publicly sold their possessions and laid the money at the apostles' feet; and distribution was publicly made as every man had need. So contributions were publicly made for the poor saints at Jerusalem. Paul prayed publicly by the seashore, and gave thanks in presence of a ship's company. The object of Jesus was not to appoint the place or posture of prayer but to expose vanity and ostentation, and to urge his followers to seek the favor of God rather than men; and what they did, to do to God and not to men. "When thou prayest, enter into thy closet; and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." This is not all the prayer that we are required to offer. It is only one part, but still a very important part. As each is a distinct individual and must give an account of himself to God, it is manifestly his duty and interest to plead his own cause before the throne of grace.

As a *preparation for secret prayer*, "Enter into thy closet, and shut the door." We find some preparation necessary to appear in the presence of those who are high in honor or in office on earth--of those whom we respect and whose approbation we desire to gain or secure. Desiring their favor, we take pains to remove all that is offensive, that there may be nothing on our part to interrupt the harmony. If this is but respectful to a being like ourselves, shall we rush into the presence of God? Even nature itself teaches that some preparation is necessary--time to collect the thoughts and calm the spirits, to reflect upon the character and claims of God, and our standing in his sight. Enter thy closet and shut the door. Exclude all company. Be literally alone. This is necessary to collectedness and self-possession. We are influenced by those about us. Their presence is a restraint upon freedom--affecting our feelings and modifying our expressions. Besides, there are confessions to be made, which need not and ought not to meet the ear of a human being. Our most secret thoughts are to be laid open and reviewed in the presence of God, the motives by which we have been actuated, the great ends which we have in view. No good ends can be answered by revealing all these particulars to men, and there is no law that requires it. But nothing should be kept back when we deal with the Searcher of Hearts. The confession will not be free and full in the presence of others, neither will the petition. We have wants and temptations, as well as sins, peculiar to ourselves; for the general likeness of human beings does not destroy the distinctions of independent character. Every one is a complete person by himself, having his own wants, and sins, and temptations, and responsibilities. Shut the door, then. Exclude all company, that the whole may be a matter simply between your souls and God.

Exclude also the world. We are connected with earth as well as heaven, and the appropriate business of life is part of our training for the world to come; and we are counted worthy to inherit the true riches only as we have been faithful in the unrighteous mammon. We cannot think of God and heaven every moment of time, any more than a man on his journey home can think every moment of home. What he does, he must do with his might; and he does it with his might only as his mind is interested in it and fixed upon it. But his mind constantly fixed upon the far distant end must overlook present duty. We are in the world and must perform the appropriate duties of the world, and we can do so only as we think of the world. But we need seasons of retirement and reflection lest the world get an advantage

over us, and from a servant become our master. Enter thy closet and shut the door. Exclude things temporal that the mind may be fully impressed with things eternal. The world is a scene of trial as well as of duty. Arm thyself for the trial by immediate and direct communion with God. Reflect upon his glorious character, his plan of salvation, the weakness and wickedness of man.

Thus prepared pray to thy *Father in secret*, with no eye to see but God's and no ear to hear but God's. Here, perhaps, is the best trial of the reality of our piety. In the congregation and the prayer meeting, and even in the family, the presence of others produces excitement and affectation; and if not the presence of God, at least their presence produces some degree of earnestness. We may have no faith to make real the presence of God, but the presence of men excites and animates. Alone, if we have no faith in God, it is literally speaking into the air. We may have a set form and go through its regular round regularly, but it is nothing but a form, and the dullest of all forms and the most unmeaning. Without faith, secret prayer is a mere form--is nothing. The spirits sink, the heart faints, the thoughts wander, and even the tongue seems almost to lose all power of utterance. The Father is in secret, and with no faith to give evidence of things unseen, there is nothing to excite feelings and concentrate thought. Faith seems to be essential even to the external performance. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." And when faith is lacking or vanishing, it is first of all manifest here. The closet has no attractions for secret prayer, has no meaning.

With many there may be zeal and earnestness to speak and to pray in public. But when they retire from the excitement of the public gaze, the spirit flags; and the higher the excitement in public the greater the depression in private. There is nothing they dread so much as to be alone, for they find nothing so insipid [dull/uninteresting]. They have what may be called a social religion. And if human beings were to be saved in companies or in masses, their prospects of heaven might be fair. But if, as the fact is, salvation is personal (depending upon individual belief and individual character), it is greatly to be feared that they have no part nor lot in the matter. As they have nothing to excite or animate in private, [they have] no communion with God in solitude. The individual is lost in the crowd and lives in public. . . . Forgetting his individuality, he is just carried with the current. He lives upon meetings, and ordinances, and excitement; and when these fail, all thought of religion and hope of heaven fail with them. Here is the origin, and progress, and end of a popular religion. When there is no communion with the Father who is in secret, the heart is not right in the sight of God, for there is no faith to give evidence of things unseen or to realize the presence of God.

Nothing but faith can give interest to private prayer or secure its continuance. "Pray to thy Father which is in secret" and pray in faith, for without faith it is impossible to please him. "He that cometh to God," then, "must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him," for in this world he can come to God in no other way but by faith. He cannot see him. "No man hath seen God at any time," and he is real to us only as we believe the revelation which he has made of himself.

But a prayer in faith will also be a prayer in *humility and reverence*. He is "of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on iniquity." "Shall mortal man be more just than God? Shall a man be more pure than his Maker? Behold, he puts no trust in his servants, and his angels he charged with folly." The very heavens are not clean in his sight. How polluted,

then, "is man, which drinketh iniquity like water!" His infinite exaltation and glory require the deepest reverence, while his purity, contrasted with our pollution, should bring down every high thought of ourselves. "I saw," says Isaiah, "the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up,"--and *he* saw him only by a strong and lively faith, which "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,"--"and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the Seraphims; each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." Here is the image of angelic worship. With what reverence and holy awe do they worship! How then should a sinner appear! If they who have never sinned thus adore the majesty on high, what reverence and humility become us! Can we trifle with the name of God, or rush into his presence with coarse familiarity or impudent boldness?

Yet we are to pray *in confidence*, "For he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." "He giveth liberally and upbraideth not." Through Jesus we have access by one spirit unto the Father, and depending upon the merits of his sacrifice we enter into the holiest of all by the faith of him. The very name of Father encourages confidence, while the sacrifice he has made and the invitations he has given allure our hearts. He that comes shall in no wise be cast out. We are to come emboldened by his promises and expecting their fulfilment, remembering there is something to be accomplished by every prayer. It is not merely a duty to be done, and done with. "He spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray and not to faint; saying, there was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man. And there was a widow in that city, and she came unto him saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man, yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" A cold and tame petition is asking a denial, for expecting nothing we are seldom disappointed. "I will not let thee go," said the patriarch, "except thou bless me."

Nor should private prayer be *left to depend upon circumstances*, or to any time that may be found convenient. It is far better to have fixed times and regular seasons for prayer; and instead of leaving so important a matter to circumstances, as far as possible to control the circumstances. There may be extraordinary seasons when much time may be requisite. On one occasion Jacob spent all night in prayer. So did the Savior. And Paul once preached till midnight. But these extraordinary seasons come only at remote intervals. They are not matters of calculation. The circumstances made the necessity. But the ordinary seasons may be matters of calculation, and ought to be. He that makes private prayer a matter of conscience will not leave the time uncertain. He will delight himself in the Almighty and always call upon him.

Pray to thy Father which *seeth in secret*. Unknown to men, it is all known to him; and it cannot be overlooked or forgotten. He knows our down-sitting and our up-rising, and every prayer is registered in his book. And even that which has not assumed form and body has a real existence with him. We are sometimes brought into straits, so that we know not what to pray for as we ought. But "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities. . . . The Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth

the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit." Our secret groanings reach his ear. There is no language--there is no audible or visible manifestation--but it reaches the eye and the ear of God, for he is present with the heart and knows all its workings.

Thy Father shall *reward thee*. This reward is given in various ways and forms in the present life; for it is not a vain thing to serve God, nor is prayer without profit. No man can hold habitual communion with God without experiencing its benefits. It gives him clearer views of the truth. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will show them his covenant." If "he that walketh with wise men shall be wise," how much more shall he that holds habitual communion with God? The corrupt affections are worn away by the power of prayer; and beholding the glory of God, he is changed into his image. He is saved from grievous mistakes in judgment and fatal errors in practice. There is an extent of information upon religious subjects and a fixedness of principle, which give a symmetry and consistency to his character.

We sometimes find men of very limited powers, and limited information upon other subjects, with a knowledge and tact in religious things that is astonishing. They have an unction from the Holy One and know all things. And they owe their knowledge and their aptness in religious things to habitual communion with God. They are not only wise unto salvation, but have a peculiar tact at communicating that wisdom. As they have power with God and prevail, so they are fitted to prevail with men; and they turn many to righteousness. Showing forth the praise of Him who has called them to glory and virtue, they are rewarded in being made an eminent blessing to their fellow men. They are rewarded in still higher and higher enjoyment. "We are saved by hope." And by habitual communion with God that hope becomes as an "anchor to the soul, both sure and steadfast," and an earnest of the heavenly inheritance, for to them that ask it shall be given, and they that seek shall find.

"He shall reward thee *openly*." The prayer is in secret, and the reward here on earth is partly so, for praying people are God's hidden ones. The world know them not, as they know not their Master. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." Jesus, in the days of his flesh, offered up supplications and prayers with strong crying and tears, to him that was able to save him from death; and he is crowned with glory and honor and immortality, and so shall they be. He has entered heaven as the Apostle and High Priest of their profession, and he is but their forerunner. His entrance is an assurance of theirs. "Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God, and him that serveth him not." Let no man say, "It is vain to serve God," or, "What profit shall we have, if we pray unto him." Here is a service which insures an abundant recompense. "Enter into thy closet and shut the door, and pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father that seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." It is a reward, though it is of grace, not of debt. For what merit can there be in asking, and what goodness can there be equal to this--to give what we ask, and even more than we ask, and even to reward the asking itself? How blessed to serve a being who places prayers in the number of services, and reckons to the account of his servants their very trust and confidence in asking all things of him! What is done in secret is openly acknowledged and recompensed.

Here, then, is a resource at all times and under all circumstances. Art thou tempted? Enter thy closet and pray to thy Father which is in secret, and you shall not be tempted

above that which you are able to bear, but he will provide a way of escape or strength to resist it. Art thou in want? Pray to thy Father which is in secret, and he shall supply all your wants out of his abundant fulness. Do fears and sins, prevailing, rise? He knows your frame. He remembers you are but dust. "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him." Do depression and gloom cover your mind? "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord." "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray." "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth liberally to all men and upbraideth not." He is more ready to give his Holy Spirit to them that ask him than earthly parents are to give good gifts to their children. "Enter into thy closet and shut the door, and pray to thy Father which is in secret;" "then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thy health shall spring forth speedily," yea, "thy light shall rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday." In every season of doubt and perplexity, and in every season of danger and distress, pray to thy Father that is in secret. "The name of the Lord is a strong tower." "The Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory."

Shall we wait till perplexities arise and dangers threaten? Is it not far better by prayer to anticipate the evil and seek and secure the protection of God when all things go well with us; that when the rains descend and the floods come and the winds blow (as at one time or another they will) we may have a permanent shelter and protection? And yet how many never pray, or at best make no conscience of prayer! In some distressing emergency a prayer is forced from them, but they have no regular seasons of prayer, and month after month passes away without communion with God. For a great portion of their lives, they cast off fear and restrain prayer. They acknowledge the duty, perhaps, and yet never, or scarcely ever, attempt to perform it. They forsake their own mercies and count themselves unworthy of eternal life, for if they have no communion with God here how shall they behold his glory or rejoice in his presence hereafter? Every situation in life, the circumstances of every day, demand continual application to the Father of mercies. And all the objections which ever were or can be brought against frequent and fervent prayer are included in one great fact--estrangement of heart from the source of all good.

We love to think, and talk, and have intercourse with objects just in proportion as they are objects of interest and affection. Prayer is insipid or repulsive only to those who have said in their hearts, "Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways." He who never prays, whatever else he may do, needs no other evidence that he is still in a state of condemnation; and he who prays but seldom can have no satisfactory evidence that he is reconciled to God. It is said of the Israelites, "When he slew them, then they sought him; and they returned, and inquired early after God. And they remembered that God was their Rock, and the high God their Redeemer. Nevertheless, they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with their tongues. For their heart was not right with him, neither were they steadfast in his covenant." There was no delight in God. They prayed as the heathen offer sacrifices to the evil spirit--from fear; or as the prophet says, "Lord, in trouble have they visited thee; they poured out a prayer when thy chastening was upon them."

There is nothing more necessary, and nothing that commends itself more strongly to every man's conscience, than prayer. And how will you answer to God if it be neglected? He has said, "Pray to thy Father which is in secret, and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly," and you had no confidence in his word, and you would not pray. He has said, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved," and you would not, and

did not call upon his name. He has said, "Ask, and ye shall receive," and you received not because you asked not. The noblest privileges, the richest blessings were to be had for the asking, and you did not ask. A price was put into your hands to get wisdom, but you had no heart to it.

Sermon IV, "Secret Prayer," in *Sermons by the Late Rev. David Merrill* (Windsor, VT: Vermont Chronicle Press, 1855). Note: The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.