

Sermons on Several Subjects

by
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Sermon VIII "Prayer in Imitation of Christ"

"And he withdrew himself into the wilderness and prayed."

Luke v. 16

The imitation of our Saviour is justly held out to us as a rule of life. But then there are many things in which we cannot imitate him. What depends upon his miraculous character must necessarily surpass our endeavours and be placed out of the reach of our imitation. This reason makes those particulars in which we *are* able to follow his example of great importance to be observed by us, because it is to these that our hopes of taking him for our pattern, of treading in his footsteps, is necessarily confined.

Now our Lord's piety is one of these particulars. We *can*, if we be so minded, pray to God as he did. We can aim at the spirit and warmth and earnestness of his devotion. We can use at least those occasions, and that mode of devotion, which his example points out to us.

[1.] It is to be remarked that a fulness of *mental devotion* was the spring and source of our Lord's visible piety. And this state of mind we must acquire. It consists in this: in a habit of turning our thoughts towards God whenever they are not taken up with some particular engagement.

Every man has some subject or other to which his thoughts turn when they are not particularly occupied. In a good Christian this subject is God, or what appertains to him. A good Christian--walking in his fields, sitting in his chamber, lying upon his bed--is thinking of God. His meditations draw, of their own accord, to that object; and then his thoughts kindle up his devotions. And devotion never burns so bright or so warm as when it is lighted up from within. The immensity, the stupendous nature of the adorable Being who made and who supports everything about us, his grace, his love, his condescension towards his reasonable and moral creatures (that is, toward men), the good things which he has placed within our reach, the heavenly happiness which he has put it in our power to obtain, the infinite moment of our acting well and right so as not to miss of the great reward (and not only to miss of our reward but to sink into perdition), such reflections will not fail of generating devotion, of moving within us either prayer or thanksgiving, or both.

This is mental devotion. Perhaps the difference between a religious and an irreligious character depends more upon this mental devotion than upon any other thing. The difference will show itself in men's lives and conversations, in their dealings with mankind, and in the various duties and offices of their station. But it originates and proceeds from a difference in their internal habits of mind with respect to God; in the habit of thinking of him in private and of what relates to him; in cultivating these thoughts, or neglecting them; inviting them or driving them from us; in forming, or in having formed a habit and custom as to this point, unobserved and unobservable by others (because it passes in the mind,

which on one can see). But [this mental devotion is] of the most decisive consequence to our spiritual character and immortal interests. This mind was in Christ--a deep, fixed, and constant piety. The expressions of it we have seen in all the forms which could bespeak correctness and sincerity. But the principle itself lay deep in his divine soul. The expressions likewise were occasional, more or fewer, as occasions called or opportunities offered. But the principle [was] fixed and constant, uninterrupted, unremitted.

[2.] But again, our Lord--whose mental piety was so unquestionable, so ardent, and so unceasing--did not, nevertheless, content himself with that. He thought fit, we find, at sundry times (and I doubt not also very frequently) to draw it forth in actual prayer; to clothe it with words, to betake himself to visible devotion; to retire to a mountain for this express purpose; to withdraw himself a short distance from his companions, to kneel down, to pass the whole night in prayer or in a place devoted to prayer.

Let all who feel their hearts impregnated with religious fervor remember this example. Remember that this disposition of the heart ought to vent itself in actual prayer. Let them not either be afraid nor ashamed, nor suffer any person nor anything to keep them from this holy exercise. They will find the devout dispositions of their souls strengthened, gratified, confirmed. This exhortation may not be necessary to the generality of pious tempers; they will naturally follow their propensity, and it will naturally carry them to prayer. But some, even good men, are too abstracted in their way of thinking upon this subject. They think that since God see and regards the heart, if their devotion be *there*, if it be within, all outward signs and expressions of it are superfluous. It is enough to answer that our blessed Lord did not so think. He had all the fulness of devotion in his soul. Nevertheless, he thought it not superfluous to utter and pronounce audible prayer to God; and not only so, but to retire and withdraw himself from other engagements, nay even from his most intimate and favoured companions, expressly for this purpose.

[3.] Again, our Lord's retirement to prayer appears commonly to have followed some signal act and display of his divine powers. He did everything to the glory of God. He referred his divine powers to his Father's gift. He made them the subject of his thankfulness, inasmuch as they advanced his great work. He followed them by his devotions.

Now every good gift comes down from the Father of lights. Whether they be natural or whether they be supernatural, the faculties which we possess are by God's donation. Wherefore any successful exercise of these faculties--any instance in which we have been capable of doing something good, properly and truly so, either for the community (which is best of all), for our neighbourhood, for our families, nay even for ourselves--ought to stir and awaken our gratitude to God, and to call forth that gratitude into actual devotion. At least, this is to imitate our blessed Lord so far as we can imitate him at all. It is adopting into our lives the principle which regulated him.

[4.] Again, it appears on one occasion, at least, that our Lord's retirement to prayer was preparatory to an important work which he was about to execute. The manner in which St. Luke states this instance is thus: "*And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God; and when it was day, he called unto him his disciples, and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles.*"

From this statement I infer that the night passed by our Lord in prayer was preparatory to

the office which he was about to execute. And surely an important office it was; important to him, important to his religion, important to the whole world. Nor let it be said that our Lord, after all, in one instance at least was unfortunate in his choice--of the twelve one was a traitor. That choice was not error; a remarkable prophecy was to be fulfilled, and other purposes were to be answered of which we cannot now speak particularly. "I know," says our Lord, "whom I have chosen." But let us confine ourselves to our observation. It was a momentous choice. It was a decision of great consequence. And it was accordingly, on our Lord's part, preceded by prayer; not only so, but by a night spent in prayer. *"He continued all night in prayer to God,"* or, if you would rather so render it, in a house set apart for prayer to God.

Here, therefore, we have an example given us which we both *can* imitate and ought to imitate. Nothing of singular importance, nothing of extraordinary moment either to ourselves or others, ought to be resolved upon or undertaken without prayer to God, without previous devotion. It is a natural operation of piety to carry the mind to God whenever anything presses and weighs upon it. They who feel not this tendency have reason to accuse and suspect themselves of want [lack] of piety. Moreover we have, first, the direct example of our Lord himself. I believe also, I may add, that we have the example and practice of good men in all ages of the world.

[5.] Again, we find our Lord resorting to prayer in his last extremity; and with an earnestness, I had almost said, a vehemence of devotion, proportioned to the occasion.

The terms in which the evangelists describe our Lord's devotion in the garden of Gethsemene, the evening preceding his death, are the strongest terms that could be used. As soon as he came to the place he bid his disciples pray. When he was at the place he said unto them, *"Pray that ye enter not into temptation."* This did not content him; this was not enough for the state and sufferings of his mind. He parted even from them; he withdrew about a stone's cast and knelt down. Here how his struggle in prayer is described. Three times he came to his disciples, and returned again to prayer. Thrice he knelt down at a distance from them, repeating the same words. Being in an agony he prayed more earnestly. Drops of sweat fell from his body as if it had been great drops of blood. Yet in all this, throughout the whole scene, the constant conclusion of his prayer was, *"not my will, but thine be done."* It was the greatest occasion that ever was. And the earnestness of our Lord's prayer, the devotion of his soul, corresponded with it.

Scenes of deep distress await us all. It is in vain to expect to pass through the world without falling into them. We have in our Lord's example a model for our behaviour in the most severe and most trying of these occasions--afflicted, yet resigned; grieved and wounded, yet submissive; not insensible of our sufferings, but increasing the ardor and fervency of our prayer in proportion to the pain and acuteness of our feelings.

But whatever may be the fortune of our lives, one great extremity at least--the hour of approaching death--is certainly to be passed through. What ought then to occupy us? What can then support us? Prayer. Prayer, with our blessed Lord himself, was a refuge from the storm. Almost every word he uttered during that tremendous scene was prayer: prayer the most earnest, the most urgent; repeated, continued, proceeding from the recesses of his soul; private, solitary; prayer for deliverance; prayer for strength; above everything, prayer for resignation.

Sermon VIII, "Prayer in Imitation of Christ," in Rev. William Paley, *Sermons on Several Subjects* (Philadelphia: Hopkins and Earle, 1808). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.