

## SERMON XIII

### "ENCOURAGEMENT TO PRAYER"

by  
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*"Ask, and it shall be given you."*  
Matthew 7:7

We have frequently addressed you on the subject of prayer, but in the present discourse we propose merely to illustrate some of the encouragements that are afforded for engaging in this exercise.

God commands us to pray to him. He does not leave it to our own discretion whether we shall pray or not, but he positively and expressly prescribes the duty as indispensable, equally as an act of homage due to himself and as the means of securing our own welfare. But though convinced that we must pray if we would render obedience to the divine authority and promote the safety and well-being of our souls, still there are various considerations to which we must give attention.

**1. Let it be remembered that the God to whom you pray is as willing and ready, as he is able, to bestow upon you the blessings that you need and ask.**

Of his power to answer your prayers it is impossible for you to doubt. He is absolute proprietor of the universe. Everything in it, material and immaterial, is at his sovereign disposal. He can give it in the measure, the mode, and the season that seems good in his sight. All this your minds admit without the least hesitation. But whether he may be pleased to exert his omnipotence in giving what *you* ask of him is a different question. When you think of the separation which sin has made between you and him, when you look to him as a holy and just and jealous God, and when you think of the demerit which he sees in your character and the provocations by which you have awakened his displeasure (giving him reason to send you a curse instead of a blessing), it is not unnatural for you to feel that prayer is hopeless, as if he would turn a deaf ear to your supplications. And if you should ask, there is the chilling apprehension that your request will either be wholly refused or granted with a frown.

Now let me assure you, my believing friends, that all such ideas are groundless and unworthy. They proceed from mistaken views of that God to whom your prayers are addressed. Whenever, therefore, they intrude into your minds, they ought to be instantly banished, for they are dishonorable to God and injurious to your own comfort.

The very circumstance of God's commanding you to pray implies an assurance that he will listen to your prayer. Surely you cannot suppose that he is merely mocking and trifling with you, making an empty display of his authority and sporting with your feelings, expectations,

and necessities? The inconsistency which this supposition involves may be displayed by sinful and capricious man, but it can have no place in the dealings of God with his creatures. There is an untainted honor and perfect consistency in all his doings that forbid the very thought.

In his general attributes of goodness and mercy you have solid ground to warrant the hope that your prayers will be heard and answered. In the very language in which he bids you ask of him what you need, he pledges himself to give it without fail and without reluctance. And this pledge reaches throughout the whole range of your desires, embracing in it every individual benefit that is necessary to your happiness. When he requires you to ask, he does not limit you to one or more of the good things which are indispensable to the improvement of your character or to the fullness of your joy. His requisition includes them all. Thus you may be satisfied that he is ready to bestow them all.

**2. But God does not leave you to mere inference on this point. He condescends to make explicit declarations of his willingness to fulfill the desires and petitions of your hearts, and he expresses this willingness in the language of unequivocal promise, of distinct and positive assurance.**

His word may be justly said to be one continued proof of it. There are indeed many passages in which prayer and promise are explicitly joined together. Yet every instance in which God intimates his readiness to give blessings to his people, though it be not expressly connected with prayer, is to be regarded as having the same meaning as if it were, because it is the doctrine of scripture, and what no Christian can forget, that every blessing he receives presupposes prayer as the appointed means of obtaining it. We may assert, therefore, that the Bible is full of divine testimony to this statement that God's ear is ever open to your cry, and that his hand is ever ready to convey to you the blessings that you need and solicit.

If I must quote any particular part of the sacred volume to illustrate the reality and the extent of God's willingness to answer prayer, I would remind you of these words: "All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matt. 21:22). These are words addressed to you from heaven by the mouth of Him who reveals to you the mercy and the will of God, and in whom you have placed your confidence as "the faithful and true witness." They proclaim in emphatic terms the absolute certainty of your receiving from him the things you ask. And they are of the most generous and comprehensive import as to the number and variety of those blessings which you are entitled to plead and may expect to obtain.

Now you cannot ask for anything that your fancy, caprice, ignorance, or corrupt inclination may dictate or suggest. Such things are, in the very nature of the case, excluded. Whatever you ask must be that which God warrants or permits you to ask, as being directly conducive or really necessary to your attainment of that salvation and happiness to which he teaches you to aspire. You may ask for any moral quality, spiritual comfort, any possession which comes within that description. And if you ask for it, the petition finds a response in the mind of God who "gives to all men liberally and upbraids not." Such prayer will infallibly secure for you (sooner or later in its suitable degree and its proper effect) the particular benefit for which you have applied.

God himself tells you this, and it argues an unbelieving heart when you allow any suspicion to arise that he will not fulfill what he has so graciously promised. His willingness is so strongly proclaimed and so frequently repeated and so closely associated with all that is true and holy in his character, that you should feel as much assured of it as if you already possessed and enjoyed the mercies you have only now implored. As the Apostle John states: "This is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we asked of him" (I John 5:14,15).

There is another declaration made by our Lord in his valedictory discourse that very strikingly illustrates the same truth: "In that day ye shall ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I shall ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because ye have loved me and have believed that I came forth from God" (John 16:26,27). He says, "I do not say to you that I shall ask the Father," as if his intercession were necessary to extort from God what he is otherwise reluctant to give or determined to withhold. God has, indeed, appointed that intercession as a constituent part of the scheme by which you are redeemed; but it is an institution of divine grace. It is an indication of that love of God which prompts him to give you all things pertaining to life and godliness.

Having loved Jesus as God's own Son and as your Savior, you are the objects of his peculiar affection. He loves you as his own by the most endearing tie. He has devised a plan by which he may righteously and richly shower down upon you the most invaluable blessings. And when Jesus pleads your cause with him, he addresses himself to his Father and your Father, one whose thoughts toward you are already thoughts of love, and who regards you with overflowing kindness and will delight in doing you good. You have no reason, therefore, to fear a cold reception or a stern denial of your requests. You have abundant reason, on the contrary, to pray without doubting and without reserve for whatsoever you stand in need of. Ask, and you shall receive, that your joy may be full.

It was thus that our Lord cheered and encouraged his more immediate disciples in the matter of prayer. And the same arguments I urge upon you, who, like them, love and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. You are the objects, as were they, of the Father's tender and affectionate regard. It is your duty and your privilege to penetrate through all the clouds that have veiled the throne at which you bend, to recognize the face of God beaming upon you with ineffable benignity, and to feel animated in spreading out your wishes before him. In him there is a well-spring of mercy from which he will bountifully supply them all.

### **3. Again, let me turn your attention to some of those representations of himself which God has been pleased to give as encouragement to draw near to him in prayer.**

For instance, he is represented as seated on a throne of grace. Now you are never to contemplate God as divested of the attributes of holiness and justice. These are essential to him and enter into every correct and comprehensive idea of his character. But were you to think of him only in his holiness, as hating the sin which he sees in you and justly visiting it with merited punishment, all approach to him would be felt as presumption, and all supplications would appear vain. He therefore reveals himself to you as occupying a throne

of grace, thus assuring you of his favor and inviting you to come to him without dread or misgiving.

God sits upon a throne high and lifted up with everything at his command, and controlled by no created power in the giving of his gifts. He is holy and just, indeed, but his holiness has been so honored and his justice so satisfied that they form no hindrance to the operation of his grace. This grace is so abundant in its riches, so liberal in its gifts, so unchecked and unrestricted in the generosity of its designs, and so accessible to all who need it, that it is mentioned as characteristic of his throne. It has such a prominence and ascendancy that all other characteristics are subordinated by it and absorbed in it. In short, grace is the name by which God's throne is spoken of.

And why does God speak of himself as occupying such a throne if it were not to persuade you that, so far from turning away your prayers from him, he is more willing to bestow than you are to receive? Let your desires be what they may--so great that you cannot calculate them, so numerous that you cannot count them, so urgent that you are ready to sink under them. Let them be what they may, there is in that one word "grace" a sufficiency and readiness to minister to them all. Even suppose that your conscience has been writing the most bitter things against you, that your transgressions appear in the most aggravated colors, that you feel your heart is hard and insensible as a rock. Let a conviction of utter unworthiness take possession of your soul, that you are afraid to look to God and ask him for the pardon, sanctification, and comfort of which you are so undeserving. Still I must exhort you to have recourse to his throne and take encouragement, for it is "the throne of grace."

The righteous Lord sits upon that throne, but his face has no frown upon it. His voice has no terror in it. On whatever part of that throne you cast your eye, you see it inscribed with "grace" for all your circumstances. There is grace to blot out your sins, though they be red like crimson. There is grace to purify your hearts, though they be full of all uncleanness. There is grace to subdue your enemies, though they come upon you as a flood. There is grace to console you amid all your sorrows, though they be great. There is grace to guide you through life, to cheer you at death, and to carry you to heaven. And as surely as God sits upon that throne of grace, so surely will he listen to your prayers. He will uphold the characteristic which he himself has engraved upon it by freely giving you whatsoever you ask in sincerity and faith.

While God represents himself as seated on a throne of grace, he also represents himself under the endearing character of a Father. He is a Father, indeed, whom you have offended by apostasy and disobedience, but his anger has been turned away, reconciliation has been effected, and he has sent forth the Spirit of Adoption into your hearts whereby you cry, "Abba, Father." Viewing him in this paternal relation, you cannot but feel convinced that he will give you what you ask. The predominant idea conveyed is that he loves you and will provide for you. He will delight to confer upon you whatever is requisite for your prosperity and comfort. It is an inherent instinct in the heart of an affectionate father to supply all the wants of his children. There is no reluctance on his part when they implore his help. He has such a tenderness toward them, such a concern for their safety and well-being, such a desire to deliver them from evil and to do them good, that almost no sacrifice is deemed to costly.

And even ingratitude and disobedience scarcely restrain his beneficence to those he loves. "As a father pities his children, so the LORD [Yahweh] pities those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13).

Whatever regard an earthly father can be supposed to pay to his helpless and dependent children may be confidently expected of our heavenly Father. Consider the following words:

"Or what man is there of you" (let him even be more than ordinarily deficient in the affections of kindred), "what man is there of you whom if his son ask bread will give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish will give him a serpent?" Is there any one of you so cruel and so hardened as either to refuse what his children in duty or from necessity desire of him, or to give them instead what is useless or injurious? On the contrary, will not his heart yearn toward them with the tenderest sympathy, and will not he be disposed to fulfill as bountifully as he can all the desires which they have expressed? "If ye, then, being evil" (with a nature that is imperfect and corrupt, and whose corruption and imperfection must necessarily cleave to all your best affections and most worthy acts), if ye being thus evil are inclined and "know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven" (in whom no defect can be conceived to exist and whose paternal love is too strong to be ever weakened and too rich to be ever exhausted), how much more shall such a Father "give good things to them that ask him!"

Such a Father is your Father in Heaven, my believing brethren. So why should you go to him with the fear of having your plea rejected? Rather, go with the confidence of obtaining what you need and ask for. Has anything occurred to discourage you from drawing near to God in prayer and asking for the blessings needed for your welfare? Be assured that your discouragement has no foundation in truth and should have no influence on your minds. God, whom you thus tremble to approach, and whose mercy you thus distrust, is your Father. It is a character which he has assumed for the very purpose of reviving, establishing, and cherishing your confidence in him. Do not dishonor him by imagining that he will lay it aside, or that he will act inconsistently with it. Go to him with the freedom, the frankness, and the undoubting faith of those whom he has called his children. He invites you into his presence and assures you of an affectionate reception. Spread out all desires of your heart, satisfied that he cannot but be willing and ready to give you every token of his loving-kindness which your needs may require.

**4. I have still to mention another proof of God's willingness to bestow the blessing that you need and ask. It consists in his having given his own Son to save you by his sufferings and death.**

It is impossible for us to estimate the value of this gift, or to conceive what love it implied on the part of God from whom it proceeded. Whether we look to the declarations of scripture respecting it or attend to its nature and consequences, we are so far from being capable of comprehending it that we must deem the value infinite, a love that passes knowledge. Now, my believing friends, you have received that gift. You have been permitted to contemplate, to admire, to experience its excellence. So why should you ever be doubtful of receiving

anything that you ask insofar as it is essential or conducive to your real welfare? You have already received the greater blessing, and can any reason be assigned for your not receiving with equal certainty and liberality all the lesser ones? The bestowal of the former intimates a boundless compassion in God who imparted it. And when it is the very same God to whom you apply for everything else, have you not ample security in his boundless compassion for the latter?

The Apostle Paul employs this very argument when he says, "He who spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" These words represent it as utterly impossible that any subordinate blessing should be refused, or should not be conferred with the utmost readiness and generosity. It would be irrational in itself and injurious to God's character to harbor even the slightest suspicion of his unwillingness to give to his people any one of all the multiplied comforts and advantages that contribute to the well-being of a redeemed soul.

You may be assured, then, that God will not and cannot despise the prayer which ascends to him from your hearts, which is offered up in faith, and which refers to benefits that you need and are authorized to ask for. Pray for these. And when at any time the apprehension steals in upon you that they will not be given, call to mind the ineffable gift of his own Son, that you may be encouraged. Let your belief in his atoning efficacy as well as its inestimable preciousness give energy and urgency to the requests that you send up to heaven, for that gift is the earnest of every other. Amid all your misgivings and anxieties, encourage your hearts by remembering that "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). "Ask, and you shall receive."

Sermon XIII, "Encouragement to Prayer," in Andrew Thomson's *Sermons and Sacramental Exhortations* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1832). **Note:** Liberty has been taken for some condensation and light paraphrasing, and punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.