

Lord, Teach us To Pray!

Why do we pray? What are the hindrances to prayer? This is not a curious nor trivial question. Religion is bound to decline when prayer is hindered. He who is too busy to pray will be too busy to live a holy life.

Other duties become pressing and absorbing, and they crowd out prayer. “Choked to death”, would be the coroner’s verdict if an inquest could be secured on this spiritual calamity. This way of hindering prayer comes on us all unawares. Satan would rather we let the grass grow on the path to our prayer-chamber than anywhere else. A closed chamber of prayer means “gone out of business” religiously. God’s glory is only secured in the business of religion by carrying that religion on with a large capital of prayer. The apostles understood this when they declared that they must give themselves “continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.” Prayer was put first, because the ministry of the Word gets its life from prayer.

The process of hindering prayer by crowding it out is simple. First, prayer is hurried. Unrest and agitation, fatal to all devout exercises, enter in. Then prayer time is shortened as love for the exercise palls. Then it is crowded into a corner and depends on little fragments of time here and there. It no longer commands respect nor brings benefit. It has fallen out of the heart, out of habits, out of life. We cease to pray and cease to live spiritually.

The only stay to the desolating floods of worldliness, business, and cares, is prayer. Christ knew this when He charged us to watch and pray. Paul knew this when he declared that “night and day he prayed exceedingly that we...might perfect that which is lacking in your faith.” There is no arriving at a high state of grace without much praying. Epaphras knew this when he “laboured fervently in prayers” for the Colossian Church.

The only way to preserve our praying from being hindered is to estimate prayer at its true and great value as Daniel did. When he knew the decree was signed, he went to his house, opened his windows, and knelt in prayer three times a day, just as he always did. It was daily prayer that gave Daniel firmness and fidelity in the hour of trial.

SATAN’S TRICKS

One of Satan’s wiliest tricks is to destroy the “best” by the “good”. Business and other duties are “good”, but we are so filled with these that they crowd out and destroy the “best”. Prayer holds the citadel for God, and if Satan can by any means weaken prayer, he has gained so far; and when prayer is dead, the citadel is taken.

The greatness of prayer, involving as it does the whole man in its most intense form, is not realized without spiritual discipline.

The simplicity of prayer, its child-like elements, also form a great obstacle to true praying. Intellect gets in the way of the heart. In song, in poetry, in memory, a man may wish himself a child again, but in prayer he must be a child again in reality. A desire which burns and consumes, which can only be voiced by a cry - it is no easy work to have this child-like spirit of prayer.

A holy life is the only preparation for prayer. It is just as difficult to pray as it is to live a holy life. In this we find a wall of seclusion; men do not love holy praying, because they do not love holy living.

Montgomery sets forth the difficulties of true praying when he declares the sublimity and simplicity of prayer:

Prayer is that simplest form of speech

That infant lips can try.

Prayer is the sublimest strains that reach

The Majesty on high.

Prayer in the Old Testament is called wrestling. Conflict and skill, strenuous and exhaustive effort are involved. In the New Testament we have the terms “striving, laboring fervently, fervent, effectual, agony” - all indicating intense effort put forth and difficulties overcome.

Christ spake a parable to this end, that men ought always to pray and not to faint. The parable of the importunate widow teaches the difficulties in praying, how they are to be surmounted, and the happy results which follow from valorous praying.

Luther said: “To have prayed well is to have studied well.” More than that, to have prayed well is to have fought well. To have prayed well is to have lived well. To pray well is to die well.

HEAVEN’S SCHOOL

Prayer is a rare gift. Prayer is not the fruit of natural talents; it is the product of faith, of holiness, of deeply spiritual character. It cannot be seized upon by untrained hands; graduates in heaven’s highest school of art can alone touch its finest keys, raise its sweetest, highest notes. Master workmen are required, for mere journeymen cannot execute the work of prayer.

The spirit of prayer should rule our spirits and our conduct. Always praying in the spirit; always acting in the spirit of praying; these make our praying strong. It is what we are out of the closet of prayer which gives victory or brings defeat. If the spirit of the world prevails in our non-closet hours, the spirit of the world will also prevail in our prayer, and it will be a vain and idle force.

We must do God’s will in our lives if we would have God’s ear in the closet of prayer. We must listen to God’s voice in public if we would have God listen to our voice in private. God must have our hearts, if we would have God’s presence.

“CLOSED FOR REPAIRS”

Men would pray better if they lived better. They would get more from God if they lived lives more obedient and more pleasing to God. Our spiritual liabilities are so greatly in excess of our spiritual assets that our closet time is spent in taking out a decree of bankruptcy instead of being the time of great spiritual wealth for us and for others. Our prayers closets are too much like the sign, “Closed for Repairs.”

John said of Christian praying, “Whatsoever we ask we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things which are pleasing in His sight.” “Whatsoever” - how comprehensive the range! This because of obedience, and doing the things which please God well. Their lives were not only true and obedient, but they were thinking about things above obedience, searching for and doing things to make God glad.

Bad living makes bad praying. We pray feebly because we live feebly. We cannot talk to God strongly when we have not lived for God strongly. Prayer cannot be made holy to God when the life has not been holy to God.

Men are to pray “lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting.” We cannot divorce praying from conduct. “Whatsoever we ask we receive of Him because we keep His commandments and do those

things that are pleasing in His sight.” “Ye ask and receive not because ye ask amiss that ye may consume it upon your lusts.”

Our religion breaks down the most sadly in our conduct. Beautiful theories are marred by ugly lives. Our praying suffers as much as our religion from bad living. Of course, the prayer of repentance is acceptable. But repentance means to quit doing wrong and learn to do well. A repentance which does not produce a change in conduct is a sham. Praying which does not result in pure conduct is a delusion.

The pity is that so much of our praying is without object or aim. It is without purpose. Prayers spring into life under the influence of some great excitement or some pressing emergency, or through some popular clamour, some great peril. But the conditions for prayer are not there. We rush into God's presence and try to link Him to our cause, inflame Him with our passions, move Him by our peril. All things are to be prayed for with clean hands and with absolute deference to God's will as we abide in Christ.

There are two great evils: not asking, and asking in a wrong way. Perhaps the greater evil is wrong asking, for it is a deceit, a fraud, a sham. The Pharisees prayed much, but they were actuated by vanity; their praying was the symbol of their hypocrisy by which they made God's house of prayer into a den of robbers.

PRAYERLESS PRAYING

Prayerless praying lacks the essential element of true praying; it is not based on desire and is devoid of earnestness and faith. Prayerless praying has no burden, no sense of need; no ardency, because there is no vision, strength, or glow of faith. Prayerless praying stakes nothing on the issue, for it has nothing at stake.

Prayerless praying has no heart in its praying. The lack of heart deprives praying of its reality, and makes it an empty and unfit vessel. Heart, soul, and life must be in our praying.

Prayerless praying is insincere. It has no honesty at heart. We name in words what we do not want at heart. We once heard an eminent and saintly preacher, now in heaven, abruptly and sharply ask of a congregation that had just arisen from prayer, “What did you pray for? If God should take hold of you and shake you, and demand what you prayed for, you could not tell Him to save your life what the prayer was that has just died from your lips.” So, as it always is, prayerless praying has neither memory nor heart. A mere form, a heterogenous mass, an insipid compound, a mixture thrown together for sound and to fill up space, but with neither heart nor aim, is prayerless praying. A dry routine, a dreary drudge, a dull and heavy task is this prayerless praying.

But prayerless praying is much worse than either task or drudge, for it divorces praying from living; it utters its words against the world, but with a heart and life that runs in the world; it prays for humility, but nurtures pride; it prays for self denial, while indulging the flesh.

The prayer habit is a good habit, but praying by dint of habit only is a very bad habit. This kind of praying is not conditioned after God's order, nor generated by God's power. It is not only a waste, a perversion, and a delusion, but it is a prolific source of unbelief.

In contrast, what a mighty force prayerful praying is. God's kingdom is advanced by it. The greatest good comes to man by it. Lord help us to pray powerful prayers!

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