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## SERMON VIII.

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### THE CHRISTIAN TAUGHT TO PRAY.

ST. LUKE XI. 1.—“Lord, teach us to pray.”

PERHAPS, brethren, there is as much of the reality of religion in these few words, as in any words uttered by our Lord’s disciples before he left them. They indicate more than meets the ear—a mind taught of God; convictions and feelings which accorded well with the situation of these men, and accord as well with our own. O that they were found among us in every breast! God would be worshipped here as he has never been worshipped by us yet. We should be the happiest people, and this the most blessed congregation, under the canopy of heaven.

Let us enquire, first, what the request in the text implies; and secondly, in what way, when we offer it, we may expect it to be answered.

I. 1. It implies a conviction of *the importance of prayer*. I mean, a lively, heartfelt conviction of its importance.

And this, in the case before us, seems to have had its origin mainly in the habits and example of Christ. He prayed often and much. He prayed in his sorrow, and he prayed in his joy. He prayed alone, and he prayed with his disciples; amidst the throng of men, and in the “solitary place.” We read of his rising up “a great while before day to pray,” of his praying “in the evening,” of his “continuing all night in prayer.” And this under circumstances so extraordinary!—without a sin for which he needed pardon, without a want which his own right hand could not supply. The natural consequence was, his disciples who witnessed much of this unceasing devotion, were struck by it and impressed. They began to feel that they also must pray; that what was necessary for their Lord, was necessary for them; that what was good for his soul, would be good also for theirs. They accordingly took this feeling to Christ, and under the influence of it, they sought of him instruction. “It came to pass,” says the evangelist, “that as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him,” in the name and probably by the desire of the rest, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

And there is not a pardoned sinner on the earth, not a man among ourselves really in the way to heaven, in whose mind a similar conviction has not been wrought. You do not think of prayer, Christian brethren, as men in general think of it, nor as you yourselves once thought of it. You always perhaps deemed it good and right; you would no more have

denied its necessity to a dependent and guilty creature, than you would have denied the necessity of water to the parched African, or of fire to the shivering inhabitant of the pole: but that estimate of prayer was taught you by others; at best, it was the dictate of reason and your own good sense; now you feel its importance. It is become a matter not of judgment only, but of experience. You are acquainted with your need of prayer, just as the African becomes acquainted with his need of water, or the Greenlander with his need of fire, or the beggar in our streets with his need of alms, or you yourselves with your need of food and air. You know now what prayer can do for you. It has saved you from so many perils, obtained for you so many mercies, rolled off from you so many burdens, comforted you in so many griefs, sweetened to you so many blessings, brought you at times so near God and God and heaven so near you, that you have no power to tell what you think of prayer. In your estimation, the earth would be a scene of unbroken darkness without it, and you cut off in the earth from your sweetest and brightest joys; nay, from your safety and your hope. You would feel yourselves, without prayer, to be abandoned sinners in an abandoned world.

2. This request implies also some knowledge of *the real nature of prayer*.

It is not easy to ascertain the precise extent of its meaning. Some have conceived that it expresses nothing more than a desire for a form of supplication; but the pharisees, or those whom John had taught to pray, could have given the disciples this. Besides, these men were Jews, and as such it is hardly reasonable to suppose that they were either ignorant of the formularies of devotion in common use among their countrymen, or so enlightened as to be dissatisfied with them. The probability is, that they had discovered at length the insufficiency of all forms, or rather of their own formal mode of employing them. They had heard their Master pray. They had witnessed his fervour, the seriousness, the abasement, and perhaps something of the elevation, of his spirit in his supplications; and their understandings were opened. Prayer appeared to them in a new light. Before, it was a ceremony; it was now an inward, spiritual service. They regarded it for the first time as the work of the heart; and conscious that their own hearts had hitherto been but little engaged in it, their request was, "Lord, teach us to pray." They wished their prayers to be in future of a higher and more spiritual character; and beyond this, they scarcely knew perhaps their own meaning or object.

And your views of prayer, brethren, if you have learned anything aright of its nature, have undergone precisely this change. There was a time when a form of sound words, and a somewhat serious mind, contented you. More than this you had heard of, but you never knew and never cared what it meant. At last came the light of God's Holy Spirit into your soul, and then

came with it new and startling views of this duty. "I have never prayed at all," you now said. "I have never even understood what prayer means. I thought it was the bending of the knee and the utterance of the lips; words well selected and solemnly pronounced; but now I see my mistake. Prayer is the utterance of the heart; it is a deep feeling within a man of his wants, and poverty, and helplessness; it is the turning of a desolate spirit to its Creator and Saviour; it is a following hard after God; it is a drawing near to him, holding intercourse with him, pouring out the heart before him, a striving to fill an empty soul out of his fulness."

Do any of you ask what prayer is? Look at the publican in the temple. "Standing afar off, he would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner!"—that was prayer. Look at blind Bartimeus sitting by the highway side near Jericho. He cried out so that none could silence him, "Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me!"—that too was prayer. Look at Peter. As he was sinking in the waves on the sea of Galilee, "Lord," he exclaimed, "save me!"—and that also was prayer. And if you turn to yourselves, that was not prayer, which you once thought so devout and hoped so much from; those words of almost heavenly fervour taught you by our church, and repeated by you so seriously in the house and at the altar of your Lord. Think of the time when you felt as though you could not pray at all; that time of bereavement and sorrow, when every earthly solace seemed gone, and every prop broken, and every hope crushed; when you were so wretched, that you knew not how to bear your wretchedness, and were forced, as your heart was well nigh breaking, to cast yourselves on God and say, though you could say no more, "Lord, help me." If ever you have prayed, brethren, you prayed then. That was indeed prayer, and like that, if you are men of prayer now, are your daily supplications. They may not always have in them equal earnestness, but they are still like that half-despairing cry of misery—there is feeling in them; they have meaning and life.

3. An impression too of *the difficulty of prayer* is plainly to be traced in the disciples' words. And this undoubtedly sprung out of their conviction of its importance, and their newly acquired knowledge of its real nature. That which is so important must, they concluded, be done aright; and that which is so spiritual, they were conscious they could not do at all; and thus they were constrained to seek help and instruction. "Lord," they said, "teach us to pray."

It is an affecting thought that in a situation like ours, we should be unable even to ask for the mercies we so urgently need; and this thought becomes still more saddening, when we reflect that our inability to pray arises chiefly out of the mournful state of our own minds. It is true that

our situation itself has something to do with it. The God to whom our supplications must be made, is an unseen Being. We are creatures of sense, and find it hard even to realize the presence of One whose “voice we have not heard at any time, nor seen his shape,” much more to conceive of him as interested in our petitions. But this is not going to the root of the matter.

Prayer, when real, is an acknowledgment of our indigence; it is a confession of emptiness and weakness: and our proud minds cannot stoop to abasement like this. It is impossible they should stoop to it; for which of us has by nature the faintest conception that his helplessness is so real and great, as to render such humiliation needful? We are not aware even of our wants. The divine bounty so constantly supplies some of them, that they are never felt; and as for the others, they are the wants of our souls, and for those souls we have neither a care nor a thought.

Besides, prayer is giving glory to God, and we do not love God. It is placing a Being with whom our carnal minds are at enmity, not only above us, but so high above us, that he becomes everything and ourselves nothing. And more—it is a voluntary going into his presence, bringing ourselves into actual contact with the holiest Being in the universe; and sin makes us wish to have nothing to do with that Being; we should rejoice to get out of his sight, and, were it possible, out of his dominions; to live in some world where neither his law nor his power could reach.

And hence the difficulty of prayer. It would be easy did our hearts feel aright, but their feelings are altogether wrong; they are full of everything that is opposed to prayer, and their workings must be controlled and changed, our hearts themselves must be re-created by the power of the Holy Ghost, before any one of us can offer up one real petition to the God who made him. And even then prayer will often be found no easy thing. The darkened mind, and the cold heart, and the self-exalting, earth-bound spirit, will either turn away from it, or give it a wrong direction and aim, or mar it and reduce it again to form and pretence. The true Christian knows this but too well. He feels something of it every day. When the apostle says, “We know not what to pray for as we ought,” he can understand him. The words of Elihu to Job are the words that often suit him well, “Teach us what we shall say unto him, for we cannot order our speech by reason of darkness.” Hence he often prays that he may be able to pray. Half the prayers he offers up are begun with this petition, or some petition like it, “Lord, teach me to pray. My soul cleaveth unto the dust; quicken thou me according to thy word. Chase away this ignorance, this strange insensibility, from my mind. Show me my wants, my errors, and my sins. Make me feel before thee as a vile, needy, helpless worm.” The request before us evidently breathes this spirit.

4. Besides intimating a conviction of the importance, the real nature, and the difficulty, of prayer, it plainly indicates also *a desire for an increased ability to pray*.

We must not suppose that the disciples had lived to this hour, with such a teacher as Christ, in utter ignorance or in habitual disregard of this obvious duty. The very request they here make, goes far to prove the reverse. It is itself a prayer. While it implies conscious ignorance and inability, it implies also something of the spirit of supplication already possessed. But these men felt that they had yet much to learn. They were not satisfied with themselves. They wished to experience more of the power of prayer; to pray more like their Master, with livelier feeling, deeper humility, greater enjoyment and success.

And is not such, brethren, the desire of your own hearts? If you have been taught to pray at all, you are not satisfied with your performance of this duty. On the contrary, you are heartily and deeply ashamed of it. Your prayers seem to you nothing better than a miserable trifling with things of tremendous import, a daring mockery of heaven. You can hardly call them prayers. When you think of the mercies you have so coldly supplicated in them, you are constrained to say, "I have talked, I have knelt, I have sometimes wept; but O how seldom have I prayed! What should I be, if the blood of Christ did not cleanse me from the sins I have committed on my knees?"

Nor are you yet satisfied with the blessedness you have found in prayer. Much as you experience in it to refresh and delight you, nothing you experience fully meets your desires. You are always, even in your happiest moments, craving for more; nay, in those moments, the thirstings of your soul after God are the strongest. The more you enjoy of his presence, the more you wish to enjoy.

The effect of all this is a most earnest anxiety for a more supplicating, devotional frame of mind. There is nothing on earth you really long for more than to pray more, to have closer and more frequent intercourse with a heavenly world, to feel more at home at your Saviour's feet. Other graces and attainments of your Christian brethren, you admire and would fain possess. You would rejoice to speak like one of them in your Master's praise; you often sigh for the strength which enables another to labour so arduously in your Master's service; but take you aside, and ask you in a sober moment, which of them all you most desire to resemble, you would think of some humble, deeply tried servant of your Lord, and say, "O let my soul be in his soul's stead! Let me pray as that man prays. Let me have that fervour, that holy delight, in my closet, which he finds in his." Nay, were your Redeemer once more on earth, did you hear him preaching his wonderful sermons, did you see him performing his marvellous works,

your wish would not be, “O that I could preach, O that I could work miracles, like Christ!” No; you would follow him to the mountain or the desert; you would look at him when most resembling yourselves, struggling, and weeping and pouring out his soul in supplication; and your desire would be, “O let me pray like my Master! Lord, teach me to pray.”

II. We pass on now to our second enquiry—How *may we expect such a petition as this to be answered?*

In the instance before us, it was answered partially at once. We owe to it the well known prayer we call the Lord’s prayer—a model of supplication, which claims at once our admiration and gratitude. The ignorant may have sometimes regarded it with a superstitious reverence, and the formalist may have repeated it with an unmeaning frequency; but human folly can no more degrade than human wisdom can surpass it. The man of the most spiritual mind has ever discovered in it the most clearly its divine origin—an elevation of thought, a loftiness of feeling, a delight in God, his will, his favour, and his glory, so comprehensive a view in so few words of his own situation and wants, that the longer he holds communion with heaven and the nearer he draws to it, the more highly he values, and the more frequently and naturally he uses, this short prayer. But with all its excellencies, it is in itself powerless. It could not teach these disciples to pray. It showed them indeed what their prayers ought to be, but it did not communicate to them the power of making their prayers like it. And what has it done for ourselves? We are as well acquainted with it as Peter or John; we have had it all our life long in our memories; it has passed our lips, it may be, a thousand times; but it has left some of us as ignorant of prayer as barbarians or heathen.

When Christ teaches a sinner effectually, he always teaches him by his own Holy Spirit. This Spirit he calls a “Spirit of grace and supplications;” and he applies this language to him, because he is the great Teacher of prayer; because not a single supplication has ever gone up from this guilty world to Jehovah’s throne, which his grace has not prompted. He gives us both the will and the power to pray; and all the teaching we can receive from any other source, unless accompanied with his influence on our minds, will do nothing for us. It may put a few barren notions into our understandings, but it can no more bring one real petition from our hearts, than it could from a stone. Our Lord well knew this. Accordingly, as soon as he had given his disciples a pattern for their supplications, we find him immediately directing them where to go for the ability to follow it. He sends them to the Holy Spirit for the inward principle of prayer, urging them to importunity in their petitions for his grace, and assuring them at the same time that their importunity shall not be lost.

How then does this Holy Spirit teach us to pray? In many ways. Among others, in these four—

1. *By discovering to us our spiritual poverty*; shewing us our wants and helplessness, or giving us a more lively sense of them.

We need instruction in everything, but in nothing more than in the knowledge of our own necessities. With wants more in number than the hairs of our heads, and so urgent that we shall perish if they are not quickly supplied, we really know little or nothing about them; listening for years to the Bible that tells us we are “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked,” and either wondering what the words mean, or so content in our imaginary abundance, that we do not think them worthy a thought. May I not appeal to your consciences? Have you not lived hours and days, nay, have not some of you lived months and years, a whole life, without one feeling of spiritual want; without the faintest suspicion of your standing, amidst the comforts that have surrounded and the pleasures that have gladdened you, empty and destitute in the world? Till this insensibility is removed, we can never pray. Prayer begins with a discovery of our necessities. It is kept alive, or, if we suffer it to die away, it is revived and strengthened by having these necessities brought before us more closely, more pressingly, more painfully. We often find it so. Who, as he has bent the knee before God, has not sometimes felt as though he had not a single want to be supplied, or a single grief to be removed, or a single transgression to be pardoned? And who, as his dead soul has looked upwards for life and feeling, has not found his mind gradually opening to a consciousness of its sins and burdens, its perils and helplessness? Ere he is aware, his heart has become alive to its emptiness; it is craving for a supply; he is hungering and thirsting after spiritual mercies, striving to take the kingdom of heaven by violence, not on account of the blessedness that is found there, its rivers of pleasure and its fulness of joy, but on account of his own urgent necessities. The Holy Spirit has awakened him to a consciousness of his poverty, a sense of want has made him importunate, a feeling of destitution has taught him to pray.

2. *Affliction* too is often made to answer the same gracious end.

We say, “Lord, teach us to pray;” and Christ says, “Yes.” And then down into the grave sinks one of our children, or away into heaven goes the most beloved of our friends; or sickness comes and withers our health, or the iron hand of adversity presses us down. You remember how Absalom treated Joab. He wished for an interview with him and sent for him, but Joab “would not come to him; and when he sent again the second time, he would not come.” What was to be done? “See,” said Absalom to his servants, “Joab’s field is near, and he hath barley there; go and set it on fire.” They did so, and the end was answered. Joab was immediately in the house



and by the side of his friend. “Why have you done this?” he said. “Because,” said Absalom, “you refused to come to me, and I had no other way of bringing you here.” So, brethren, when we “restrain prayer before God,” when we seem, in the hurry of the world, to have half forgotten how to pray, when the Lord calls again and again to us, “Seek ye my face,” and calls in vain; then comes the fire on our corn; then comes some dispensation of providence, that destroys or threatens to destroy our comforts, the fruit of our labours or the object of our hopes, and then at last we fly to our God; then we know once again what prayer means; a second spiritual youth is given to our souls; they feel with all the energy of their first feeling, and pray with all the fervour of their first supplications, and become at last so earnest, so pleading, so much like what sinful and needy souls ought to be, that we bless the affliction which has quickened us again to life and consciousness. Prayer is the design of trouble. God has an end in afflicting us worthy his wisdom and goodness, and this end he accomplishes—he brings the people whom he loves, to his throne. “I will go and return to my place,” he says, “till they acknowledge their offence and seek my face;” and then he adds, “In their affliction, they will seek me early.”

Many a comfort have you loved away, brethren; and some comforts you have prayed away. Exceeding joy in a gourd has often withered it, and sometimes a prayer lest you should overvalue it, has proved its destruction. It is a serious thing to pray, and more especially to pray for a praying heart. It is often like signing the death-warrant of the very things we love the best. And what if it is? Who cannot afford to lose the whole world, if he has for his companion, and friend, and portion, an all-sufficient God?

3. At other times Christ stirs up the soul to prayer, *by giving it an enlarged view of the divine promises and goodness.*

A despairing man never prays. Prayer is the language of expectation and hope. It follows then, that the extent and energy of our supplications will be in proportion to our knowledge, not only of our own necessities, but of the willingness of God to supply them. Now we cannot reason ourselves into any lively perception of this willingness. It is to be discovered satisfactorily only in God’s promises; and only by a simple belief in these, can we make it an object of our hope and confidence. When therefore the Holy Spirit would excite in any soul the fervour of prayer, he carries home to that soul the promises made by God to sinners in the gospel of his Son. He increases its knowledge of them; he strengthens its faith in them. He enables it to see the reality and glory of the divine love in Christ Jesus. He shows it how complete that reconciliation is, which he has made for its sins; how rich that provision which he has purchased for its necessities; how wide in its grasp, how well ordered in all things, how sure, that covenant which he has formed with his chosen. In order to

bring the mind to pour out its desires, it is made to see all the objects of its desires within reach of it, attainable, treasured up by infinite grace in Christ, and treasured up in him for the sinful and vile, yea, for itself—peace and pardon, strength and consolation, grace, and glory, and heaven, all at the free disposal of the Beloved, and he asking for them no money or price, but standing in our desolate world proclaiming his riches, and crying aloud to its perishing inhabitants, “Ask and ye shall have; seek and ye shall find. Every one that asketh, receiveth, and he that seeketh, findeth.”

4. Sometimes the Holy Spirit carries us yet farther. He teaches us to pray *by giving us clearer views of Christ as a Mediator and Intercessor.*

“Teach me to pray,” says the soul, and then Christ is manifested to the soul, ascended in his human nature to the heavens, and sitting there, in that nature, on a throne of grace, for the very purpose of hearing and answering its petitions. It sees in the exalted man Christ Jesus a Mediator, a medium of access and intercourse between itself and its God.

We can hardly pray to God simply as God, to God as a mere Spirit. The instant we thus strive to conceive of him, we are baffled. Our weak minds discover that there is nothing in him which they can comprehend; nothing on which they can fasten; we are bewildered and distressed. But the Holy Spirit comes and withdraws the veil. He shows me the Lord Jesus in the heavens in a human form, and with a human nature and a human heart; as much the Son of Man as when he trod the dust, and as really possessed of all mortal feelings, sin only excepted, as myself. And then he tells me that this is the Being to whom my prayers are to rise. He tells me that, shrouded in him, dwells all the fulness of the Godhead; that this Son of Man is the Lord of the universe, none other than the everlasting God, the Author and Giver of all the blessings that are found in all his worlds. Influenced by his grace, I believe this amazing fact; and the consequence is, I have now a Being before me, on whom my thoughts can settle. God is brought down, in some measure, within the range of my capacities. He is to be conceived of by me, and approached by me, and leant on, and trusted, and rejoiced in. I behold in my once crucified Redeemer a glorious Mediator. Through him, I have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Seeing that I have such a High Priest in the heavens, one so merciful and gracious; one who has shared my griefs and carried my sorrows; one who, in his own unparalleled misery, never forgot my wants, and who now, in his wonderful joy, is still touched with a feeling of my infirmities; what shall keep me from his throne of grace? I now come boldly unto the throne of grace. I know that whatsoever I ask the Father in his name, I shall receive it. I feel that neither my meanness, nor my unworthiness, nor my abhorred iniquities, shall prevent the great God of the heavens from bowing down to me, nor his riches of mercy from flowing into my soul. I cry, Abba, Father; I feel at a Father’s

feet, and am at rest.

You are aware, brethren, that I might still go on. I might say, Christ teaches us to pray by much that is passing around us, by what we call accidents—events that make perhaps a whole parish or nation start; crushing, and crushing in an hour, the hopes, and prospects, and happiness that seemed almost out of the reach of decay or change. And he teaches us by deliverances, by bringing us to the edge of some precipice, and then, as our foot goes over it, snatching us away from it; showing us in the same moment our danger and our deliverance. But let this suffice.

I would only ask in conclusion, and I would ask it with seriousness, and I would beseech you to answer it to yourselves with seriousness, What think you of prayer? What think you of its nature and importance? But more especially, what are your thoughts as to your own need of instruction in it, its difficulty? Perhaps the idea is new to you. Perhaps till this hour you never heard or thought of there being any difficulty at all in this thing; you have never experienced any. In this case, you must come to one of these two conclusions—either the sermon you have now heard has been grounded on a fallacy, either the disciples meant nothing of what I have represented them as meaning, when they said, “Lord, teach us to pray;” or you know nothing about prayer. Here, on the one hand, is a sense of difficulty, conscious inability and ignorance; on the other hand, no suspicion of anything of the kind, ease and self-complacency. I will not say where the truth lies, but this I may say, you have not a godly friend on the earth, who would think as you think of prayer, for a thousand worlds. If the disciples of our Lord erred, if the minister you have now been listening to has erred, they have erred in such company, that there has never been a man of vital, practical godliness, who has not belonged to it.

An easy thing to pray, brethren? O yes; to utter words without meaning anything by them; to offer a lip-service to God; to use the thrilling, and abasing, and elevating services of our church, without one emotion in the soul, without one feeling of humiliation or one tendency heavenwards—this is easy: but to get the heart into the work; to bar out of the heart its worldly thoughts and cares; to feel in Jehovah’s presence as we pray, and to feel, at the same time, poor and guilty there; to raise an earth-bound soul to God—try for once to do this; go home to your closets and make the attempt. There is no difficulty in foretelling the result—you will soon be forced to say, as the disciples said long ago, “Lord, teach us to pray.” And then, if you persevere in the effort, we can tell you as easily and certainly what you will say next—you will ere

long be smiting in secret on your breast, and you will, each of you, be forced to cry out, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." And we can tell you too the end, the final issue, of all this. Before many years are passed, your prayers will be turned into such praises as you have never yet uttered or conceived of. The very heavens will be ringing with this happy song from your happy lips, "Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb."