

[This lecture was gratefully received from Michael Madden, an elder of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland, Australia, who has an interest in 19th century church history.]

This lecture is taken from a rare first edition classic of theology, William Cunningham's "Theological Lectures on subjects connected with Natural Theology, Evidences of Christianity, The Canon and Inspiration of Scripture."

London: James Nisbet & Co., 1878.

LECTURE V.

PRAYER, MEDITATION, AND TEMPTATION.

WE have had occasion to advert to Luther's well-known position that it is prayer, meditation, and temptation that contribute to make a theologian, and we have explained to you the nature of meditation, as well as given you a brief outline of the vast field of topics on which this meditation, implying as it does the vigorous and steady exercise of all your powers and faculties, is to be exercised. Luther places prayer first, and this was nothing more than is justly due to its paramount importance; it is the imperative and primary duty of all who desire to become acquainted with theology, and qualified for the office of a minister of the gospel, to abound in prayer and supplication. It is quite true that men without piety and without prayer may read many theological books, that God may uphold and sustain them in the ordinary exercise of their faculties when directed to these objects, as when directed to any others, and that they may thus acquire a large measure of acquaintance with theological topics, and be able to discuss them and dispute about them. It has often been remarked, and the remark is undoubtedly true, that many men have written ably and convincingly in defence of the truth of the Christian revelation, in opposition to the attacks of infidels, who never understood or comprehended the leading truths contained in the revelation which they proved to have come from God, and who of course derived no real permanent benefit from the revelation which God had given them. It is a truth clearly revealed to us in Scripture, that no man ever really attains to any such knowledge of God's revealed will as will be available for his own personal salvation, or warrant him in entertaining the expectation of being instrumental through the truth in promoting the salvation of others, except through the direct agency of the Holy Ghost. The agency of the Holy Spirit in convincing men savingly of the truth of God's revelation, and in enabling them to understand its meaning, we shall have occasion afterwards to consider. But in the meantime, we assume it as true, as the basis of our exhortation to you to accompany the whole

of your theological studies with a spirit and habit of earnest prayer for the illuminating influences of the Holy Ghost. The truths upon the subject which ought to be most deeply impressed upon your minds, and which ought to be constantly remembered and applied are just these: 1st, that all really useful and valuable knowledge of theology, or of God's revealed will, must come from God himself; 2d, that God imparts this knowledge in connection with the study of his word, and the other means of grace, through direct agency of the Holy Ghost, the third person of the Godhead; and 3d, that prayer is the direct and appropriate means which God has appointed and promised to bless, for drawing down upon us the influences of the Holy Ghost. If these truths are duly impressed upon your minds, and if along with these convictions you have a real, sincere, and permanent desire to know God's revealed will, with a view to the great practical ends which this revelation was intended to serve with reference to men, collectively and individually, then the natural, the necessary result will be, that you will abound in prayer and supplication for the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit, that you will earnestly and importunately seek his guidance and direction with reference to the whole of your studies, to every book which you peruse, every topic to which your attention is directed, and every attempt you make to investigate the meaning of any portion of his word. You have all been taught, and the teaching was in full accordance with the sacred Scriptures, that "prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will"; (Shorter Catechism.-Ed.) and if you have at all rightly apprehended this truth, you must have seen, that is the discharge of this duty, or in the exercise of the privilege of prayer, thing depends upon the existence in your hearts of a desire obtain something from God, which desire you offer up to from that conviction that he is able and willing to grant it, and offering it up to him is the best and most certain means of having your desires accomplished. The first thing to be attended to then is, that you have in this matter a desire agreeable to God's will. God will have all men to come to the knowledge of the truth, and therefore every honest desire directed to the attainment of a knowledge of his revealed will, may be properly offered up to him in prayer.

That the desire of theological knowledge be really agreeable to God's will, and therefore a suitable basis for acceptable prayer, it must be founded upon right views of what divine truth is, and of what are the objects which it was intended by God to serve.

Theological knowledge is in itself a good thing, and therefore ought to be desired. But it may be desired from unworthy or selfish motives, or without the presence and influence of those considerations that should lead men to desire it, and either of these circumstances would vitiate the whole state of mind out of which the desire proceeds, and which truly determines its whole moral character—its agreeableness to God's will. The apostle says, "He that desireth the office of a bishop (or pastor), desireth a good thing." The episcopate or pastoral office is therefore in itself a good thing, and a proper object of rightful desire; but if a man desire the office of a bishop, not from a real and honest regard to the true nature and proper ends of the Christian ministry, but influenced by a regard to filthy

lucre, to power, influence, reputation, love of literary ease, or any consideration derived merely from the contemplation of things seen and temporal, and not from the great spiritual and eternal results which the ministry was designed to be instrumental in effecting, then the desire, however strong and powerful, becomes vitiated and sinful in its character, as proceeding from and indicating a state of mind inconsistent with the requirements of God's law, and in opposition to his revealed will. In like manner the desire of theological knowledge, the wish to attain those qualifications, or some of them, usually required before men are admitted to the ministry, may originate in mere love of knowledge as a means of intellectual exercise and cultivation, in a regard to wealth, or power, or fame; and then the state of mind, the originating motive which gives the moral character to the desire, is sinful and offensive to God. The desire of theological knowledge, of an acquaintance with God's revealed will, is only then right and acceptable when it is founded upon right views of what God's revealed will is, and of what the purposes are which it was intended to effect; in one word, when this desire of knowledge originates in a previous intelligent desire to realize, or attain to, or to be instrumental in promoting, the great ends for which God made known his will to men.

And in this way, under the head of prayer, which is an offering up of desires, there may be comprehended the consideration of the whole motives by which men are induced to engage in theological study, and in preparing for the work of the ministry. The motive by which men should be led to engage in theological study is a real desire to attain to the knowledge of God's revealed will, and the grounds of reason of this desire, the causes that produce it, and keep it in strong and vigorous exercise, should be right views of its nature, excellence, and objects, as coming from God, as making him known to us, and as communicated by him to men, in order that they, through the knowledge and belief of it, may be saved from eternal misery, and enabled to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever. It is because theology, as taught in the word of God, is possessed of this character, and intended to be the means of effecting these results, that you should desire the knowledge of it. And as candidates for the office of the ministry, you should seek and desire the knowledge of it, not only for your own salvation, but in order that, devoting your lives to the making it known to others, you may become the instruments of saving the souls of your fellow-men. A desire to attain to a full knowledge of God's revealed will, and generally to acquire all the qualifications necessary for entering upon the work of the ministry, originating in such views as these, clearly apprehended, and deeply impressed upon your hearts, will ever be accompanied with profound humility, with a deep sense of responsibility, and with a firm determination to be unwearied and persevering, to spare no pains, and to shrink from no sacrifice, in the use of all the means by which the necessary knowledge may be acquired, and the due qualifications may be secured. And the first and most indispensable of all requisites is, that you have such a desire, founded upon such views and considerations; and whenever this desire becomes at any time weak and languid, you are to seek to have it strengthened and invigorated by meditation upon the value of divine truth, and the preciousness of

the salvation of souls. When this desire has been really called forth in your hearts—and without it your labours and studies in acquiring theological knowledge cannot be expected to lead to any important practical results, but only to harden your hearts and prove offensive to God—then you will feel constrained to offer it up to God in prayer, under a conviction that he alone can gratify it, and animated by the assurance that he has promised his Holy Spirit to them that ask him. If all your studies, and especially all your attempts to ascertain the meaning of the statements of God's word, are not accompanied by fervent prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the inference is irresistible, either that you do not really desire to become savingly acquainted with divine truth for your own benefit and that of others, or else that you do not really believe that God alone can bestow this knowledge, and that he usually gives it in answer to prayer. And it is most proper that, in connection with this topic, you should examine carefully into the state of your hearts, and into the motives which have led you to engage in a course of theological study, the desires by which you are animated in the prosecution of it, and the objects which you have in view. Without right views and deep impressions of the origin and source, the character and objects of theological truth, you can have no right and well-principled desire to acquire the knowledge of it, and without such a desire existing in your heart, and distinctly recognised and felt there, you can present no sincere or acceptable prayer to God for the enlightening influences of the Holy Spirit.

Where no desire exists in the heart, of course it cannot be offered up; and where a desire for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is not offered up, there is no reason to expect that the Spirit will be given. If you are not yet aware that a useful and really valuable knowledge of theology must come from the Holy Spirit, and is usually given in answer to prayer, you are still ignorant of the first principles of God's oracles; and if you have no real and ardent desire to get this knowledge, and are not ready and resolved to abound and to persevere in the use of all the means which may contribute to the attainment of it, then your attendance here is a mockery, it is a hypocritical profession which does not correspond with the actual state of your hearts; and in that case it would be much safer and more expedient for you to direct your attention to some other object of pursuit. Your prayers thus become tests of your character and motives—plain indications of the real desires that exist in your hearts, and of the objects which you are really aiming at. Although a desire to have the enlightening influences of the Holy Spirit is the only right basis, and will prove the only efficient source of prayer for his outpouring, yet it is to be remembered that the desire must not only exist, but must also be offered up. Men are very apt to deceive themselves in regard to the state of their hearts, and the character of their desires and affections. They are not naturally inclined to pray, and you must beware of being satisfied with any other evidence of the existence and strength of that desire, under the influence of which you profess to be acting, except the fervency and the frequency with which you offer it up to God in prayer. There may be other causes which may interest you in the studies in which you are about to be engaged, and may induce you to pursue them with some degree of ardour and eagerness, such as the mere pleasure arising

from the pursuit of knowledge and the study of the works of men eminently distinguished for ability and learning, or a determination to make a creditable preparation for the duties of the profession which you have chosen for life; but in so far as your prosecution of theological study arises from any of these motives, you will not be led to much fervent prayer for the out-pouring of the Holy Ghost, even though you may be willing to admit in words that his influence alone can make you successful it is only a desire of theological knowledge, based upon those views and motives which we have described, that will lead you to abound and to persevere in prayer for the effusion of the Holy Spirit; and if you are not fervent and frequent in your prayers for his guidance, it is the plain dictate of common sense and prudence that you are not yet influenced by a sincere and intelligent desire that God by his Spirit would guide you into all truth. You are not then to infer that you have a desire for theological knowledge of the right kind, based upon right views, unless you are habitually praying for the guidance of God's Spirit; and you may be assured that during the whole of your theological studies which ought to last during your lives, the restraining of prayer, a disposition to neglect or disregard this exercise, or to perform it carelessly or perfunctorily, may be regarded as marking at once a declension in your spiritual rigour and activity, and also a diminished proficiency in the acquisition of really valuable professional knowledge. I am not at present discussing the subject of prayer as an article in the scheme of Christian doctrine, and therefore will make no attempt to prove to you its value and importance, or endeavour to explain to you how it may be expected to operate beneficially in promoting your progress in your studies. I assume that you profess to believe these great truths on which at once its obligation and its efficiency are founded, and would most earnestly entreat you to take care that this duty be never neglected or carelessly or perfunctorily performed; that any symptoms of negligence or indifference upon this point in your own feeling and practice may awake in you instant jealousy and alarm, constrain you to repair to God's throne with deeper fervency and more earnest importunity than ever, and lead you to meditate more deeply upon those views which may impress upon you a sense of your own ignorance, helplessness, and dependence upon God's Spirit; of the infinite value of divine truth, the ends for which it was made known, and your obligations to pursue them; and then you will assuredly be led to pray, and to pray aright, for the outpouring of the Holy Ghost to guide you into all truth. Let it be ever deeply impressed upon your minds that if you have not those spiritual influences which are necessary to guide you into all truth, to prepare you fully for the work of the ministry, the adequate and comprehensive explanation of your deficiency is to be found in this—it is "because you ask not, or because you ask amiss;" and let this consideration be applied by you at once to deepen your sense of your own responsibility for your ignorance and your short-comings and at the same time to encourage you to greater fervency and importunity of prayer, and to a more diligent use of all the means on which the blessing of God is asked and effected. "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him" (James i. 5).

The third thing, according to Luther's enumeration, which is necessary, in addition to prayer and meditation, to make a theologian, is temptation or experience, or the practical application of divine truth in the way of guarding against evil tendencies and results. We may have occasion at a future period of your studies to explain to you more fully this element—the qualifications or exercises of a theologian or a minister of the gospel; but it is right that even now you should understand its meaning; as it may be useful even now that you should have some regard to the acquirement and use of it. The great duty of a minister of the gospel is to explain, enforce, and apply divine truth as contained in the sacred Scriptures, in order that by the agency of the Spirit through the instrumentality of the truth, men may be first of all turned from darkness to light, and then thereafter enabled to die more and more unto sin, and to live more and more unto righteousness. It is of course assumed as indispensable that those who devote themselves to the proclamation of divine truth for this purpose, have themselves experienced its converting and regenerating power, that they are recommending that to others, the efficiency of which they have tried and experienced themselves, in changing their natures and turning them to God, by leading them to embrace Christ, and which they are still employing for leading them to die more and more unto sin, and to live more and more unto righteousness. Now, this work, in which every man who can be regarded as justified to be the spiritual instructor of others ought to be engaged—that of mortifying and subduing sin in his own members—is attended with some difficulties, i.e. there are temptations which stand in the way of his prosecuting this work with due zeal and activity and perseverance; and one exercise, therefore, in which he ought continually to be engaged is applying the truths which he has been taught by the Spirit to resist these temptations, and to prosecute the work of going on from one degree of grace to another. The habit and exercise of applying divine truth for resisting temptation and growing in grace is indispensable to every believer, to every one who has really entered upon the way to Zion. But at present we are called upon specially to notice that it tends greatly to promote and extend men's real knowledge and intimate discernment of divine truth, and to aid them unspeakably in rightly dividing it or applying it wisely or judiciously for the benefit of others. And it was this, whose necessity and importance Luther enforced under the name of temptation, as one of those things essential to make a theologian or a minister of the gospel. You can have no thorough and intimate acquaintance with divine truth, and especially you will be very ill fitted to explain and apply it for the benefit of others, unless you have had some practice in actually bringing it to bear upon the resistance of those temptations with which all believers are assailed in their journey towards Zion. All the principal truths revealed in Scripture are intended to be instrumental in leading men—those to whom they are made known—to receive Christ Jesus the Lord, and thereafter to walk in him, in opposition to all the obstacles which the devil, the world, and the flesh may interpose. The word of God is the sword of the Spirit, and is continually to be employed in the spiritual warfare; and the man who has not had the benefit of temptation in the sense in which we have explained it, is like one who has learned the use of the sword only from written instructions, without having tried to handle or to wield it, and who, of course, is still very unfit

for defending himself against the assault of enemies, and still more unfit for instructing others in the art of self-defence.

The whole doctrines of God's word have a practical tendency; they have all been revealed to us for practical objects, and they should be all employed for producing practical results. A man cannot be said to have a full and adequate knowledge of what God has revealed in his word unless he has made some practical application of it to its intended objects, unless he has not only formed some notion or conception of it, but actually tried the use of it. A man who has purchased a book may be said, in a certain sense, to have in his possession the knowledge which the book contains. The book lies on his table, and he can, when he chooses, take it up and read it, but he does not possess, in any proper sense, or to any valuable purpose, the knowledge which the book contains, until he has made use of his possession of it, by reading and digesting it, until he has applied it to its intended purpose. So in like manner, no one can be said fully to know and comprehend the truths revealed in God's word, until he has not merely acquired some notions about them, but actually begun at least to apply them to the great practical purposes which they were intended to serve, in enabling those within whose reach they have been brought to resist temptation, to mortify sin, and to go on to higher attainments, in conformity to the image and will of him who revealed them. This process of actually applying the word of God and the doctrines which it contains to their great practical purpose in the formation of character and in the regulation of conduct, according to the actual circumstances in which men are in providence placed and the temptations they are called upon to encounter, produces a clear, impressive, experimental acquaintance with divine truth, which cannot be acquired in any other way, and which peculiarly fits them for communicating clear and impressive conceptions of them to others; and it is held as a maxim applicable to all branches of knowledge, that an acquaintance with any subject which qualifies and entitles a man to become an instructor of others, must be thorough and extensive, such as to give him the clearest, fullest and most impressive conception of it himself. And such a knowledge of the word of God and of divine truth cannot be attained except by those who have in some measure succeeded in testing its real nature and its intended practical results upon themselves by really applying it to resist temptation, and to promote their own spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. Hence it is not uncommon to meet with persons who have not read much, and who have had but little mental cultivation, but who have been long in the habit of applying the word of God and the doctrines of the gospel to the object of being enabled to resist temptation and be directed in difficulties, to be comforted in trials, and to be guided and encouraged in their spiritual progress, and who, by the study of the Bible, and by this process of practically applying it, have acquired an intimate and thorough knowledge of the word of God and of Christian truth, have attained to a clearness of conception on those subjects, and hold their views with a firmness of grasp which many book-learned theologians have never reached, and which all the ingenuity and sophistry of error cannot diminish or impair.

This is a process which ought to be ever going on, and which will certainly not impede but greatly promote your more formal studies in theology. As private Christians, you are bound to be continually resisting temptation, mortifying sin, and growing in grace; and by carrying on this process through the unceasing application of the word of God and divine truth, and by the reflex act of observing the operations and affections of your own mind while the work of bringing divine truth to bear upon it is going on, you will undoubtedly acquire much real practical available knowledge of the word of God and of the truths which it was intended to unfold, and this knowledge is of essential importance to all who are allowed to be put in trust with the gospel. Divine truth is then only applied to its right purpose when it is employed in this way, then alone is it fully seen in its proper light and in its true character, and no one therefore can be regarded as possessed of a full and competent knowledge of it unless he has seen and watched the process of its being subjected to such experiments.

It is your imperative duty, in accordance with the injunction which Paul gave to Timothy, to flee youthful lusts, which war against the soul, to be avoiding every appearance of evil, to be even already enduring hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ, i.e. to be mortifying pride and ambition, self-confidence, self-conceit, envy, and worldliness, and to be cultivating and cherishing in your souls all the fruits of the Spirit. In this work you will have temptations to resist and difficulties to encounter. You must employ the whole armour of God, especially the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, i.e., under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you are to be ever employing the word of God and the truths which it unfolds; and by carrying on this process faithfully and conscientiously, and by reflecting on its nature, its manifestations, and its results, you will not only grow in grace and in meetness for heaven, but you will acquire a much more thorough insight into the word of God and the truths of Scripture, and be much more fully prepared than otherwise you could have been for wielding the sword of the Spirit for the conversion of sinners and the edification of Christ's body.

These are the processes by which theologians are made, and by which men are prepared for the work of the ministry—prayer, meditation, and temptation, in the sense in which Luther used it, and in which we have endeavoured to explain it. Prayer and the actual application of divine truth for resisting temptation and mortifying sin are matters of express and positive obligation upon all men considered simply as private Christians, who are called upon to work out their own salvation, and irrespective of any regard to their use as means of acquiring a full acquaintance with theology. If you have been brought at all to realise something of your relation to God, your need of mercy and grace, and your obligations to prepare for death and judgment, if you have for yourselves entered on the way to Zion,—and unless all this is the case, your profession of preparing for the work of the ministry is a mockery of Him who yet is not mocked,—then you will certainly abound in prayer and supplication for the outpouring of the Spirit to guide you into all truth and holiness, and you will faithfully apply divine truth to enable you to die more and more unto sin, and to live more and more unto

righteousness. And this work of praying for the Spirit and acquiring an experimental knowledge of divine truth by applying it to its great practical purpose and observing the nature and results of the process, must go on doing all your lives. The duty of increasing in knowledge and in holiness continues ever to attach to you, until you are made perfect in holiness. You are to be sanctified by the Spirit and through the truth, and therefore it is your duty to abound in prayer, and to be bringing divine truth to bear upon every department of your nature and every circumstance of your situation; and by this process, faithfully pursued, will you assuredly acquire much sound knowledge of Christian theology, and make the best preparation for the work of the ministry.