EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE.

BY THE REV. J. C. RYLE, B.A.,

CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD,

VICAR OF STRADBROKE, SUFFOLK;  
*Author of* “*Home Truths,*”*etc.*

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MATTHEW VI. 1–8.

1 Take heed that ye do not your alms before men to be seen of them; otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

2 Therefore when thou doest *thine* alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

3 But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth;

4 That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

5 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites *are*: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the comers of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

7 But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen *do*; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

IN this part of the Sermon on the Mount the Lord Jesus gives us instruction on two subjects. One is that of giving alms. The other is that of prayer. Both were subjects to which the Jews attached great importance. Both in themselves deserve the serious attention of all professing Christians.

Observe that our Lord takes it for granted, *that all who call themselves His disciples will give alms*. He assumes as a matter of course, that they will think it a solemn duty to give, according to their means, to relieve the wants of others. The only point He handles is the manner in which the duty should be done. This is a weighty lesson. It condemns the selfish stinginess of many in the matter of giving money. How many are “rich towards themselves” but poor towards God! How many never give a farthing to do good to the bodies and souls of men! And have such persons any right to be called Christians, in their present state of mind? It may be well doubted. A giving Saviour should have giving disciples.

Observe again that our Lord takes it for granted, *that all who call themselves His disciples will pray*. He assumes this also as a matter of course. He only gives directions as to the best way of praying. This is another lesson which deserves to be continually remembered. It teaches plainly that prayerless people are not genuine Christians. It is not enough to join in the prayers of the congregation on Sundays, or attend the prayer of a family on week-days. There must be private prayer also. Without this we may be outward members of Christ’s church, but we are not living members of Christ.

But what are the rules laid down for our guidance about almsgiving and praying? They are few and simple. But they contain much matter for thought.

In giving, *everything like ostentation is to be abhorred and avoided.* We are not to give as if we wished everybody to see how liberal and charitable we are, and desired the praise of our fellow men. We are to shun everything like display. We are to give quietly, and make as little noise as possible about our charities. We are to aim at the spirit of the proverbial saying, “Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth. “

In praying, *the principal object to be sought, is to be alone with God.* We should endeavour to find some place where no mortal eye sees us, and where we can pour out our hearts with the feeling that no one is looking at us but God.—This is a rule which many find it very difficult to follow. The poor man and the servant often find it almost impossible to be really alone. But it is a rule which we must all make great efforts to obey. Necessity, in such cases, is often the mother of invention. When a person has a real will to find some place, where he can be in secret with his God, he will generally find a way.

In all our duties, whether giving, or praying, the great thing to be kept in mind is, *that we have to do with a heart-searching and all-knowing God.* “Our Father seeth in secret.” Everything like formality, affectation, or mere bodily service, is abominable and worthless in God’s sight. He takes no account of the quantity of money we give, or the quantity of words we use. The one thing at which His all-seeing eye looks is the nature of our motives, and the state of our hearts.

May we all remember these things. Here lies a rock, on which many are continually making spiritual shipwreck. They flatter themselves that all must be right with their souls, if they only perform a certain amount of “religious duties.” They forget that God does not regard the quantity, but the quality of our service. His favour is not to be bought, as many seem to suppose, by the formal repetition of a number of words, or the self-righteous payment of a sum of money to a charitable institution. Where are our hearts? Are we doing all, whether we give or pray, “as to the Lord, and not to men?” Do we realize the eye of God? Do we simply and solely desire to please Him, who “seeth in secret,” and by whom “actions are weighed?” (1 Sam. ii. 3. ) Are we sincere? These are the sort of questions, with which we should daily ply our souls.

MATTHEW VI. 9–15.

9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

10 Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as *it is* in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:

15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

THESE verses are few in number, and soon read, but they are of immense importance. They contain that wonderful pattern of prayer with which the Lord Jesus has supplied His people, commonly called “The Lord’s Prayer.”

Perhaps no part of Scripture is so well known as this. Its words are familiar, wherever Christianity is found; thousands and tens of thousands, who never saw a Bible, or heard the pure Gospel, are acquainted with “Our Father,” or “Paternoster.” Happy would it be for the world if this prayer was as well known in the spirit as it is in the letter.

No part of Scripture is so full, and so simple at the same time as this. It is the first prayer which we learn to offer up, when we are little children: here is its simplicity. It contains the germ of everything which the most advanced saint can desire: here is its fulness. The more we ponder every word it contains the more we shall feel “this prayer is of God.”

The Lord’s Prayer consists of ten parts or sentences.—There is one declaration of the Being to whom we pray; there are three prayers respecting His name, His kingdom, and His will; there are four prayers respecting our daily wants, our sins, or weakness, and our dangers; there is one profession of our feeling towards others; there is one concluding ascription of praise.—In all these parts we are taught to say “we,” and “our.” We are to remember others, as well as ourselves.—On each of these parts a volume might be written. We must content ourselves at present with taking up sentence after sentence, and marking out the lessons which each sentence contains.

The first sentence declares *to whom we are to pray:* “Our Father which art in heaven.” We are not to pray to saints and angels, but to the everlasting Father, the Father of spirits, the Lord of heaven and earth. We call Him Father in the lowest sense, as our Creator: as St. Paul told the Athenians, “in Him we live, and move, and have our being,—we are also His offspring.” (Acts xvii. 28.) We call Him Father in the highest sense, as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, reconciling us to Himself through the death of His Son. (Coloss. i. 20–22.) We profess that which the old Testament saints only saw dimly and afar off,—we profess to be His children by faith in Christ, and to have “the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” (Rom. viii. 15.) This, we must never forget, is the sonship that we must desire, if we would be saved. Without faith in Christ’s blood and union with Him it is useless to talk of trusting in the “Fatherhood” of God.

The second sentence is *a petition respecting God’s name:* “Hallowed be Thy name.” By the “Name” of God we mean all those attributes under which He is revealed to us,—His power, wisdom, holiness, justice, mercy, and truth. By asking that they may be “hallowed,” we mean that they may be made known and glorified. The glory of God is the first thing that God’s children should desire. It is the object of one of our Lord’s own prayers: “Father, glorify Thy name.” (John xii. 28.) It is the purpose for which the world was created; it is the end for which the saints are called and converted. It is the chief thing we should seek, that “God in all things may be glorified.” (1 Peter iv. 11.)

The third sentence is *a petition concerning God’s kingdom*:“Thy kingdom come.” By His kingdom we mean, first, the kingdom of grace which God sets up and maintains in the hearts of all living members of Christ, by His Spirit and Word. But we mean chiefly, the kingdom of glory which shall one day be set up, when Jesus shall come the second time, and “all shall know Him from the least to the greatest.” (Heb. viii. 11.) This is the time when sin, and sorrow, and Satan shall be cast out of the world. It is the time when the Jews shall be converted, and the fulness of the Gentiles shall come in (Rom. xi. 25), and a time that is above all things to be desired. It therefore fills a foremost place in the Lord’s Prayer. We ask that which is expressed in the words of the Burial Service: “that it may please God to hasten His kingdom.”

The fourth sentence is *a petition concerning God’s will:* “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” We here pray that God’s laws may be obeyed by men as perfectly, readily, and unceasingly, as they are by angels in heaven. We ask that those who now obey not His laws may be taught to obey them, and that those who do obey them may obey them better. Our truest happiness is perfect submission to God’s will, and it is the highest charity to pray that all mankind may know it, obey it, and submit to it.

The fifth sentence is *a petition respecting our own daily wants:* “Give us this day our daily bread.” We are here taught to acknowledge our entire dependence on God for the supply of our daily necessities. As Israel required daily manna, so we require daily “bread.” We confess that we are poor, weak, wanting creatures, and beseech Him who is our Maker to take care of us. We ask for “bread,” as the simplest of our wants, and in that word we include all that our bodies require.

The sixth sentence is *a petition respecting our sins:* “Forgive us our debts.” We confess that we are sinners, and need daily grants of pardon and forgiveness. This is a part of the Lord’s Prayer which deserves especially to be remembered. It condemns all self-righteousness and self-justifying. We are instructed here to keep up a continual habit of confession at the throne of grace, and a continual habit of seeking mercy and remission. Let this never be forgotten. We need daily to “wash our feet.” (John xiii. 10.)

The seventh sentence is *a profession respecting our own feelings towards others:* we ask our Father to “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” This is the only profession in the whole prayer, and the only part on which our Lord comments and dwells, when He has concluded the prayer. The object of it is to remind us that we must not expect our prayers for forgiveness to be heard if we pray with malice and spite in our hearts towards others. To pray in such a frame of mind is mere formality and hypocrisy. It is even worse than hypocrisy; it is as much as saying, “Do not forgive me at all.” Our prayers are nothing without charity. We must not expect to be forgiven, if we cannot forgive.

The eighth sentence is *a petition respecting our weakness:* “Lead us not into temptation.” It teaches us that we are liable, at all times, to be led astray and to fall. It instructs us to confess our infirmity, and beseech God to hold us up, and not allow us to run into sin. We ask Him, who orders all things in heaven and earth, to restrain us from going into that which would injure our souls, and never to suffer us to be “tempted above that which we are able to bear.” (1 Cor. x. 13.)

The ninth sentence is *a petition respecting our dangers:* “Deliver us from evil.” We are here taught to ask God to deliver us from the evil that is in the world, the evil that is within our own hearts, and not least from that evil one, the devil. We confess that, so long as we are in the body, we are constantly seeing, hearing, and feeling the presence of evil. It is about us, and within us, and around us on every side; and we entreat Him, who alone can preserve us, to be continually delivering us from its power. (John xvii. 15.)

The last sentence is *an ascription of praise:* “Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory.” We declare in these words our belief that the kingdoms of this world are the rightful property of our Father; that to Him alone belongs all “power;” and that He alone deserves to receive all “glory.” And we conclude by offering to Him the profession of our hearts, that we give Him all honour and praise, and rejoice that He is King of kings, and Lord of lords.

And now let us examine ourselves, and see whether we really desire to have the things which we are taught to ask for in the Lord’s Prayer. Thousands, it may be feared, repeat these words daily as a form, but never consider what they are saying. They care nothing for the “glory,” the “kingdom,” or the “will” of God. They have no sense of dependence, sinfulness, weakness, or danger. They have no love or charity towards their enemies, and yet they repeat the Lord’s Prayer! These things ought not to be so. May we resolve that, by God’s help, our hearts shall always go together with our lips! Happy is he who can really call God his “Father” through Jesus Christ his Saviour, and can therefore say a heartfelt “Amen” to all that the Lord’s Prayer contains.

MATTHEW VI. 16–24.

16 Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;

18 That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

19 Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

22 The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body should be full of light,

23 But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great *is* that darkness!

24 No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

THESEare three subjects brought before us in this part of our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount. These three are fasting, worldliness, and singleness of purpose in religion.

*Fasting,* or occasional abstinence from food, in order to bring the body into subjection to the spirit, is a practice frequently mentioned in the Bible, and generally in connection with prayer. David fasted when his child was sick; Daniel fasted when he sought special light from God; Paul and Barnabas fasted when they appointed elders; Esther fasted before going in to Ahasuerus.—It is a subject about which we find no direct command in the New Testament. It seems to be left to every one’s discretion, whether he will fast or not.—In this absence of direct command, we may see great wisdom. Many a poor man never has enough to eat, and it would be an insult to tell him to fast: many a sickly person can hardly be kept well with the closest attention to diet, and could not fast without bringing on illness.—It is a matter in which everyone must be persuaded in his own mind, and not rashly condemn others who do not agree with him.—One thing only must never be forgotten: those who fast should do it quietly, secretly, and without ostentation. Let them not “appear to men” to fast. Let them not fast to man, but to God.

*Worldliness* is one of the greatest dangers that beset man’s soul. It is no wonder that we find our Lord speaking strongly about it. It is an insidious, specious, plausible enemy. It seems so innocent to pay close attention to our business! It seems so harmless to seek our happiness in this world, so long as we keep clear of open sins!—Yet here is a rock on which many make shipwreck to all eternity. They “lay up treasure on earth,” and forget to “lay up treasure in heaven.” May we all remember this! Where are our hearts? What do we love best? Are our chiefest affections on things in earth, or things in heaven? Life or death depends on the answer we can give to these questions. If our treasure is earthly, our hearts will be earthly also. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be.”

*Singleness of purpose* is one great secret of spiritual prosperity. If our eyes do not see distinctly, we cannot walk without stumbling and falling. If we attempt to work for two different masters, we are sure to give satisfaction to neither. It is just the same with respect to our souls. We cannot serve Christ and the world at the same time. It is vain to attempt it. The thing cannot be done. The ark and Dagon will never stand together. God must be king over our hearts: His law, His will, His precepts, must receive our first attention, and then, and not till then, everything in our inward man will fall into its right place. Unless our hearts are so ordered, everything will be in confusion. “Thy whole body shall be full of darkness.”

Let us learn from our Lord’s instructions about fasting, *the great importance of cheerfulness* in our religion. Those words, “anoint thy head, and wash thy face, are full of deep meaning. They should teach us to aim at letting men see that Christianity makes us happy. Never let us forget that there is no religion in looking melancholy and gloomy. Are we dissatisfied with Christ’s wages, and Christ’s service? Surely not! Then let us not look as if we were.

Let us learn from our Lord’s caution about worldliness, *what need we have to watch and pray against an earthly spirit.* What are the vast majority of professing Christians round us doing? “They are laying up treasure on earth:” there can be no mistake about it; their tastes, their ways, their habits, tell a fearful tale. They are not “laying up treasure in heaven.” Let us beware that we do not sink into hell by paying excessive attention to lawful things. Open transgression of God’s law slays its thousands, but worldliness its tens of thousands.

Let us learn from our Lord’s words about the “single eye,” *the true secret of the failures* which so many Christians seem to make in their religion. There are failures, in all quarters. There are thousands in our churches uncomfortable, ill-at-ease, and dissatisfied with themselves, and they hardly know why. The reason is revealed here: they are trying to keep in with both sides. They are endeavouring to please God and please man, to serve Christ and serve the world at the same time. Let us not commit this mistake. Let us be decided, thoroughgoing, uncompromising followers of Christ. Let our motto be that of Paul: “One thing I do.” (Phil. iii. 13.) Then we shall be happy Christians: we shall feel the sun shining on our faces—heart, head, and conscience will all be full of light. Decision is the secret of happiness in religion. Be decided for Christ, and “thy whole body shall be full of light.”

MATTHEW VI. 25–34.

25 Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

26 Behold the fowls of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

27 Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?

28 And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

29 And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

30 Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven, *shall* he not much more *clothe* you, O ye of little faith?

31 Therefore take no thought saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

32 (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

33 But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

34 Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day *is* the evil thereof.

THESE verses are a striking example of the combined wisdom and compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ’s teaching. He knows the heart of a man. He knows that we are always ready to turn off warnings against worldliness, by the argument that we cannot help being anxious about the things of this life. “Have we not our families to provide for? Must not our bodily wants be supplied? How can we possibly get through life if we think first of our souls?” The Lord Jesus foresaw such thoughts, and furnished an answer.

He forbids us *to keep up an anxious spirit* about the things of this world. Four times over He says, “Take no thought.” About life,—about food,—about clothing,—about the morrow, “take no thought.” Be not over-careful: be not over-anxious. Prudent provision for the future is right: wearing, corroding, self-tormenting anxiety is wrong.

He reminds us of *the providential care that God continually takes of everything that He has created.* Has He given us “life”? Then He will surely not let us want anything necessary for its maintenance.—Has He given us a “body”? Then He will surely not let us die for want of clothing. He that calls us into being will doubtless find meat to feed us.

He points out *the uselessness of over-anxiety.* Our life is certainly in God’s hand; all the care in the world will not make us continue a minute beyond the time which God has appointed. We cannot add one hour to our lives. We shall not die till our work is done.

He sends us *to the birds of the air* for instruction. They make no provision for the future: “they sow not, neither do they reap;” they lay up no stores against time yet to come; they do not “gather into barns:” they literally live from day to day on what they can pick up, by using the instinct God has put in them. They ought to teach us that no man doing his duty in the station to which God has called him, shall ever be allowed to come to poverty.

He bids us observe *the flowers of the field.* Year after year they are decked with the gayest colours, without the slightest labour or exertion on their part: “they toil not, neither do they spin.” God, by His almighty power, clothes them with beauty every season. The same God is the Father of all believers. Why should they doubt that He is able to provide them with raiment, as well as the “lilies of the field”? He who takes thought for perishable flowers, will surely not neglect the bodies in which dwell immortal souls.

He suggests to us that over-carefulness about the things of this world is *most unworthy of a Christian*. One great feature of heathenism is living for the present. Let the heathen, if he will, be anxious: he knows nothing of a Father in heaven; but let the Christian, who has clearer light and knowledge, give proof of it by his faith and contentment. When bereaved of those whom we love, we are not to “sorrow as others who have no hope.” (1 Thess. iv. 13.) When tried by anxieties about this life, we are not to be over-careful, as if we had no God, and no Christ.

He offers us *a gracious promise* as a remedy against an anxious spirit. He assures us that if we “seek first” and foremost to have a place in the kingdom of grace and glory, everything that we really want in this world shall be given to us: it shall be “added,” over and above our heavenly inheritance. “All things shall work together for good to them that love God.” “No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly.” (Rom. viii. 28; Psalm lxxxiv. 11.)

Last of all, He seals up all His instruction on this subject by laying down *one of the wisest maxims*. “The morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” We are not to carry cares before they come: we are to attend to to-day’s business, and leave to-morrow’s anxieties till to-morrow dawns. We may die before to-morrow. We know not what may happen on the morrow. This only we may be assured of,—that if to-morrow brings a cross, He who sends it can and will send grace to bear it.

In all this passage there is a treasury of golden lessons. Let us seek to use them in our daily life. Let us not only read them, but turn them to practical account. Let us watch and pray against an anxious and over-careful spirit. It deeply concerns our happiness to do so. Half our miseries are caused by fancying things that we think are coming upon us: half the things that we expect to come upon us never come at all. Where is our faith? Where is our confidence in our Saviour’s words? We may well take shame to ourselves when we read these verses, and then look into our hearts. We may be sure that David’s words are true: “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” (Psalm xxxvii. 25.)