

X. PRAYER BORN OF COMPASSION

"Open your New Testament, take it with you to your knees, and set Jesus Christ out of it before you. Are you like David in the sixty-third Psalm? Is your soul thirsting for God, and is your flesh longing for God in a dry and thirsty land where no water is? Then set Jesus at the well of Samaria before the eyes of your thirsty heart. And, again set Him before your heart when He stood on the last day, that great day of the feast, and cried, saying, If any man thirst let him come to me and drink.' Or, are you like David after the matter of Uriah? For, day and night, thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drouth of summer.' Then set Him before you who says: I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.' . . . Or are you the unhappy father of a prodigal son? Then, set your Father in heaven always before you: and set the Son of God always before you as He composes and preaches the parable of all parables for you and your son."--Dr. Alexander White

We speak here more particularly of spiritual compassion, that which is born in a renewed heart, and which finds hospitality there. This compassion has in it the quality of mercy, is of the nature of pity, and moves the soul with tenderness of feeling for others. Compassion is moved at the sight of sin, sorrow and suffering. It stands at the other extreme to indifference of spirit to the wants and woes of others, and is far removed from insensibility and hardness of heart, in the midst of want and trouble and wretchedness. Compassion stands besides sympathy for others, is interested in them, and is concerned about them.

That which excites and develops compassion and puts it to work, is the sight of multitudes in want and distress, and helpless to relieve themselves. Helplessness especially appeals to compassion. Compassion is silent but does not remain secluded. It goes out at the sight of trouble, sin and need. Compassion runs out in earnest prayer, first of all, for those for whom it feels, and has a sympathy for them. Prayer for others is born of a sympathetic heart. Prayer is natural and almost spontaneous when compassion is begotten in the heart. Prayer belongs to the compassionate man.

There is a certain compassion which belongs to the natural man, which expends its force in simple gifts to those in need, not to be despised. But spiritual compassion, the kind born in a renewed heart, which is Christly in its nature, is deeper, broader and more prayerlike. Christly compassion always moves to prayer. This sort of compassion goes beyond the relief of mere bodily wants, and saying, "Be ye warmed--be ye clothed." It reaches deeper down and goes much farther.

Compassion is not blind. Rather we should say, that compassion is not born of blindness. He who has compassion of soul has eyes, first of all, to see the things which excite compassion. He who has no eyes to see the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the wants and woes of humanity, will never have compassion for humanity. It is written of our Lord that "when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them." First, seeing the multitudes, with their hunger, their woes and their helpless condition, then compassion. Then prayer for the multitudes. Hard is he, and far from being Christlike, who sees the multitudes, and is unmoved at the sight of their sad state, their unhappiness and their peril. He has no heart of prayer for men.

Compassion may not always move men, but is always moved toward men. Compassion may not always turn men to God, but it will, and does, turn God to man. And where it is most helpless to relieve the needs of others, it can at least break out into prayer to God for others. Compassion is never indifferent, selfish, and forgetful of others. Compassion has alone to do with others. The fact that the multitudes were as sheep having no shepherd, was the one thing which appealed to our Lord's compassionate nature. Then their hunger moved Him, and the sight of the sufferings and diseases of these multitudes stirred the pity of His heart.

"Father of mercies, send Thy grace

All powerful from above,

To form in our obedient souls

The image of Thy love.

"O may our sympathising breasts

That generous pleasure know;

Kindly to share in others' joy,

And weep for others' woe."

But compassion has not alone to do with the body and its disabilities and needs. The soul's distressing state, its needs and danger all appeal to compassion. The highest state of grace is known by the infallible mark of compassion for poor sinners. This sort of compassion belongs to grace, and sees not alone the bodies of men, but their immortal spirits, soiled by sin, unhappy in their condition without God, and in imminent peril of being forever lost. When compassion beholds this sight of dying men hurrying to the bar of God, then it is that it breaks out into intercessions for sinful men. Then it is that compassion speaks out after this fashion:

"But feeble my compassion proves,

And can but weep where most it loves;

Thy own all saving arm employ,

And turn these drops of grief to joy."

The Prophet Jeremiah declares this about God, giving the reason why sinners are not consumed by His wrath:

"It is of the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because his compassion fail not."

And it is this Divine quality in us which makes us so much like God. So we find the Psalmist describing the righteous man who is pronounced blessed by God: "He is gracious and full of compassion, and righteous."

And as giving great encouragement to penitent praying sinners, the Psalmist thus records some of the striking attributes of the Divine

character: "The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, and of great mercy."

It is no wonder, then, that we find it recorded several times of our Lord while on earth that "he was moved with compassion." Can any one doubt that His compassion moved Him to pray for those suffering, sorrowing ones who came across His pathway?

Paul was wonderfully interested in the religious welfare of his Jewish brethren, was concerned over them, and his heart was strangely warmed with tender compassion for their salvation, even though mistreated and sorely persecuted by them. In writing to the Romans, we hear him thus express himself:

"I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart; for I could wish that myself were accursed for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

What marvellous compassion is here described for Paul's own nation! What wonder that a little later on he records his desire and prayer:

"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved."

We have an interesting case in Matthew which gives us an account of what excited so largely the compassion of our Lord at one time:

"But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest."

It seems from parallel statements that our Lord had called His disciples aside to rest awhile, exhausted as He and they were by the excessive drafts on them, by the ceaseless contact with the persons who were ever coming and going, and by their exhaustive toil in ministering to the immense multitudes. But the multitudes precede Him, and instead of finding wilderness-solitude, quiet and repose, He finds great multitudes eager to see and hear, and to be healed. His compassions are moved. The ripened harvests need labourers. He did not call these labourers at once, by sovereign authority, but charges the disciples to betake themselves to God in prayer, asking Him to send forth labourers into His harvest.

Here is the urgency of prayer enforced by the compassions of our Lord. It is prayer born of compassion for perishing humanity. Prayer is pressed on the Church for labourers to be sent into the harvest of the Lord. The harvest will go to waste and perish without the labourers, while the labourers must be God-chosen, God-sent, and God commissioned. But God does not send these labourers into His harvest without prayer. The failure of the labourers is owing to the failure of prayer. The scarcity of labourers in the harvest is due to the fact that the Church fails to pray for labourers according to His command.

The ingathering of the harvests of earth for the granaries of heaven is dependent on the prayers of God's people. Prayer secures the labourers sufficient in quantity and in quality for all the needs of the harvest.

God's chosen labourers, God's endowed labourers, and God's thrust-forth labourers, are the only ones who will truly go, filled with Christly compassion and endued with Christly power, whose going will avail, and these are secured by prayer. Christ's people on their knees with Christ's compassion in their hearts for dying men and for needy souls, exposed to eternal peril, is the pledge of labourers in numbers and character to meet the wants of earth and the purposes of heaven.

God is sovereign of the earth and of heaven, and the choice of labourers in His harvest He delegates to no one else. Prayer honours Him as sovereign and moves Him to His wise and holy selection. We will have to put prayer to the front ere the fields of paganism will be successfully tilled for Christ. God knows His men, and He likewise knows full well His work. Prayer gets God to send forth the best men and the most fit men and the men best qualified to work in the harvest. Moving the missionary cause by forces this side of God has been its bane, its weakness and its failure. Compassion for the world of sinners, fallen in Adam, but redeemed in Christ will move the Church to pray for them and stir the Church to pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers into the harvest.

"Lord of the harvest hear

Thy needy servants' cry;

Answer our faith's effectual prayer,

And all our wants supply.

"Convert and send forth more

Into Thy Church abroad;

And let them speak Thy word of power,

As workers with their God."

What a comfort and what hope there is to fill our breasts when we think of one in Heaven who ever liveth to intercede for us, because "His compassion fails not!" Above everything else, we have a compassionate Saviour, one "who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them who are out of the way, for that he himself is compassed about with infirmity." The compassion of our Lord well fits Him for being the Great High Priest of Adam's fallen, lost and helpless race.

And if He is filled with such compassion that it moves Him at the Father's right hand to intercede for us, then by every token we should have the same compassion on the ignorant and those out of the way, exposed to Divine wrath, as would move us to pray for them. Just in so far as we are compassionate will we be prayerful for others. Compassion does not expend its force in simply saying, "Be ye warmed; be ye clothed," but drives us to our knees in prayer for those who need Christ and His grace.

"The Son of God in tears

The wondering angels see;

Be thou astonished, O my soul!

He shed those tears for thee.

"He wept that we might weep;

Each sin demands a tear;

In heaven alone no sin is found,

And there's no weeping there."

Jesus Christ was altogether man. While He was the Divine Son of God yet at the same time, He was the human Son of God. Christ had a pre-eminently human side, and, here, compassion reigned. He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin. At one time how the flesh seems to have weakened under the fearful strain upon Him, and how He must have inwardly shrunk under the pain and pull! Looking up to heaven, He prays, "Father, save me from this hour." How the spirit nerves and holds--"but for this cause came I to this hour." Only he can solve this mystery who has followed His Lord in straits and gloom and pain, and realised that the "spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."

All this but fitted our Lord to be a compassionate Saviour. It is no sin to feel the pain and realise the darkness on the path into which God leads. It is only human to cry out against the pain, the terror, and desolation of that hour. It is Divine to cry out to God in that hour, even while shrinking and sinking down, "For this cause came I unto this hour." Shall I fail through the weakness of the flesh? No. "Father, glorify thy name." How strong it makes us, and how true, to have one pole star to guide us to the glory of God!