

PRAYER AND CHARACTER AND CONDUCT

"General Charles James Gordon, the hero of Khartum, was a truly Christian soldier. Shut up in the Sudanese town he gallantly held out for one year, but, finally, was overcome and slain. On his memorial in Westminster Abbey are these words, 'He gave his money to the poor; his sympathy to the sorrowing; his life to his country and his soul to God.'" -- HOMER W. HODGE.

PRAYER governs conduct and conduct makes character. Conduct, is what we do; character, is what we are. Conduct is the outward life. Character is the life unseen, hidden within, yet evidenced by that which is seen. Conduct is external, seen from without; character is internal -- operating within. In the economy of grace conduct is the offspring of character. Character is the state of the heart, conduct its outward expression. Character is the root of the tree, conduct, the fruit it bears.

Prayer is related to all the gifts of grace. To character and conduct its relation is that of a helper. Prayer helps to establish character and fashion conduct, and both for their successful continuance depend on prayer. There may be a certain degree of moral character and conduct independent of prayer, but there cannot be anything like distinctive religious character and Christian conduct without it. Prayer helps, where all other aids fail. The more we pray, the better we are, the purer and better our lives.

The very end and purpose of the atoning work of Christ is to create religious character and to make Christian conduct.

"Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works."

In Christ's teaching, it is not simply works of charity and deeds of mercy upon which He insists, but inward spiritual character. This much is demanded, and nothing short of it, will suffice.

In the study of Paul's Epistles, there is one thing which stands out, clearly and unmistakably -- the insistence on holiness of heart, and righteousness of life. Paul does not seek, so much, to promote what is termed "personal work," nor is the leading theme of his letters deeds of charity. It is the condition of the human heart and the blamelessness of the personal life, which form the burden of the writings of St. Paul.

Elsewhere in the Scriptures, too, it is character and conduct which are made preeminent. The Christian religion deals with men who are devoid of spiritual character, and unholiness in life, and aims so to change them, that they become holy in heart and righteous in life. It aims to change bad men into good men; it deals with inward badness, and works to change it into inward goodness. And it is just here where prayer enters and demonstrates its wonderful efficacy and fruit. Prayer drives toward this specific end. In fact, without prayer, no such supernatural change in moral character, can ever be effected. For the change from badness to goodness is not wrought "by works of righteousness which we have done," but according to God's mercy, which saves us "by the washing of regeneration." And this marvellous change is brought to pass through earnest, persistent, faithful prayer. Any alleged form of Christianity, which does not effect this change in the hearts of men, is a delusion

and a snare.

The office of prayer is to change the character and conduct of men, and in countless instances, has been wrought by prayer. At this point, prayer, by its credentials, has proved its divinity. And just as it is the office of prayer to effect this, so it is the prime work of the Church to take hold of evil men and make them good. Its mission is to change human nature, to change character, influence behaviour, to revolutionize conduct. The Church is presumed to be righteous, and should be engaged in turning men to righteousness. The Church is God's manufactory on earth, and its primary duty is to create and foster righteousness of character. This is its very first business. Primarily, its work is not to acquire members, nor amass numbers, nor aim at money-getting, nor engage in deeds of charity and works of mercy, but to produce righteousness of character, and purity of the outward life.

A product reflects and partakes of the character of the manufactory which makes it. A righteous Church with a righteous purpose makes righteous men. Prayer produces cleanliness of heart and purity of life. It can produce nothing else. Unrighteous conduct is born of prayerlessness; the two go hand-in-hand. Prayer and sinning cannot keep company with each other. One, or the other, must, of necessity, stop. Get men to pray, and they will quit sinning, because prayer creates a distaste for sinning, and so works upon the heart, that evil-doing becomes repugnant, and the entire nature lifted to a reverent contemplation of high and holy things.

Prayer is based on character. What we are with God gauges our influence with Him. It was the inner character, not the outward seeming, of such men as Abraham, Job, David, Moses and all others, who had such great influence with God in the days of old. And, today, it is not so much our words, as what we really are, which weighs with God. Conduct affects character, of course, and counts for much in our praying. At the same time, character affects conduct to a far greater extent, and has a superior influence over prayer. Our inner life not only gives colour to our praying, but body, as well. Bad living means bad praying and, in the end, no praying at all. We pray feebly because we live feebly. The stream of prayer cannot rise higher than the fountain of living. The force of the inner chamber is made up of the energy which flows from the confluent streams of living. And the weakness of living grows out of the shallowness and shoddiness of character.

Feebleness of living reflects its debility and languor in the praying hours. We simply cannot talk to God, strongly, intimately, and confidently unless we are living for Him, faithfully and truly. The prayer-closet cannot become sanctified unto God, when the life is alien to His precepts and purpose. We must learn this lesson well -- that righteous character and Christlike conduct give us a peculiar and preferential standing in prayer before God. His holy Word gives special emphasis to the part conduct has in imparting value to our praying when it declares:

"Then shalt thou call and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and He shall say, Here I am; if thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth the finger, and speaking vanity."

The wickedness of Israel and their heinous practices were definitely cited by Isaiah, as the reason why God would turn His ears away from their prayers:

"And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood."

The same sad truth was declared by the Lord through the mouth of Jeremiah:

"Therefore, pray not thou for this people, neither lift up a cry or prayer for them; for I will not hear them in the time that they cry unto Me for their trouble."

Here, it is plainly stated, that unholy conduct is a bar to successful praying, just as it is clearly intimated that, in order to have full access to God in prayer, there must be a total abandonment of conscious and premeditated sin.

We are enjoined to pray, "lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting," and must pass the time of our sojourning here, in a rigorous abstaining from evil if we are to retain our privilege of calling upon the Father. We cannot, by any process, divorce praying from conduct.

"Whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things which are pleasing in His sight."

And James declares roundly that men ask and receive not, because they ask amiss, and seek only the gratification of selfish desires.

Our Lord's injunction, "Watch ye, and pray always," is to cover and guard all our conduct, so that we may come to our inner chamber with all its force secured by a vigilant guard kept over our lives.

"And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares."

Quite often, Christian experience founders on the rock of conduct. Beautiful theories are marred by ugly lives. The most difficult thing about piety, as it is the most impressive, is to be able to live it. It is the life which counts, and our praying suffers, as do other phases of our religious experience, from bad living.

In primitive times preachers were charged to preach by their lives, or not to preach at all. So, today, Christians, everywhere, ought to be charged to pray by their lives, or not to pray at all. The most effective preaching, is not that which is heard from the pulpit, but that which is proclaimed quietly, humbly and consistently; which exhibits its excellencies in the home, and in the community. Example preaches a far more effective sermon than precept. The best preaching, even in the pulpit, is that which is fortified by godly living, in the preacher, himself. The most effective work done by the pew is preceded by, and accompanied with, holiness of life, separation from the world, severance from sin. Some of the strongest appeals are made with mute lips -- by godly fathers and saintly mothers who, around the fireside, feared God, loved His cause, and daily exhibited to their children and others about them, the beauties and excellencies of Christian life and conduct.

The best-prepared, most eloquent sermon can be marred and rendered

ineffective, by questionable practices in the preacher. The most active church worker can have the labour of his hands vitiated by worldliness of spirit and inconsistency of life. Men preach by their lives, not by their words, and sermons are delivered, not so much in, and from a pulpit, as in tempers, actions, and the thousand and one incidents which crowd the pathway of daily life.

Of course, the prayer of repentance is acceptable to God. He delights in hearing the cries of penitent sinners. But repentance involves not only sorrow for sin, but the turning away from wrong-doing, and the learning to do well. A repentance which does not produce a change in character and conduct, is a mere sham, which should deceive nobody. Old things must pass away, all things must become new.

Praying, which does not result in right thinking and right living, is a farce. We have missed the whole office of prayer if it fail to purge character and rectify conduct. We have failed entirely to apprehend the virtue of prayer, if it bring not about the revolutionizing of the life. In the very nature of things, we must quit praying, or our bad conduct. Cold, formal praying may exist side by side, with bad conduct, but such praying, in the estimation of God, is no praying at all. Our praying advances in power, just in so far as it rectifies the life. Growing in purity and devotion to God will be a more prayerful life.

The character of the inner life is a condition of effectual praying. As is the life, so will the praying be. An inconsistent life obstructs praying and neutralizes what little praying we may do. Always, it is "the prayer of the righteous man which availeth much." Indeed, one may go further and assert, that it is only the prayer of the righteous which avails anything at all -- at any time. To have an eye to God's glory; to be possessed by an earnest desire to please Him in all our ways; to possess hands busy in His service; to have feet swift to run in the way of His commandments -- these give weight and influence and power to prayer, and secure an audience with God. The incubus of our lives often breaks the force of our praying, and, not unfrequently, are as doors of brass, in the face of prayer.

Praying must come out of a cleansed heart and be presented and urged with the "lifting up of holy hands." It must be fortified by a life aiming, unceasingly, to obey God, to attain conformity to the Divine law, and to come into submission to the Divine will.

Let it not be forgotten, that, while life is a condition of prayer, prayer is also the condition of righteous living. Prayer promotes righteous living, and is the one great aid to uprightness of heart and life. The fruit of real praying is right living. Praying sets him who prays to the great business of "working out his salvation with fear and trembling;" puts him to watching his temper, conversation and conduct; causes him to "walk circumspectly, redeeming the time;" enables him to "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith he is called, with all lowliness and meekness;" gives him a high incentive to pursue his pilgrimage consistently by "shunning every evil way, and walking in the good."