

V. JESUS CHRIST, THE DIVINE TEACHER OF PRAYER

A friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him! He knocks again. "Friend! lend me three loaves?" He waits a while and then knocks again. "Friend! I must have three loaves!" "Trouble me not: the door is now shut; I cannot rise and give thee!" He stands still. He turns to go home. He comes back. He knocks again. "Friend!" he cries. He puts his ear to the door. There is a sound inside, and then the light of a candle shines through the hole of the door. The bars of the door are drawn back, and he gets not three loaves only, but as many as he needs. "And I say unto you, Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you."--Alexander Whyte, D.D.

Jesus Christ was the Divine Teacher of prayer. Its power and nature had been illustrated by many a saint and prophet in olden times, but modern sainthood and modern teachers of prayer had lost their inspiration and life. Religiously dead, [] teachers and superficial ecclesiastics had forgotten what it was to pray. They did much of saying prayers, on state occasions, in public, with much ostentation and parade, but pray they did not. To them it was almost a lost practice. In the multiplicity of saying prayers they had lost the art of praying.

The history of the disciples during the earthly life of our Lord was not marked with much devotion. They were much enamoured by their personal association with Christ. They were charmed by His words, excited by His miracles, and were entertained and concerned by the hopes which a selfish interest aroused in His person and mission. Taken up with the superficial and worldly views of His character, they neglected and overlooked the deeper and weightier things which belonged to Him and His mission. The neglect of the most obliging and ordinary duties by them was a noticeable feature in their conduct. So evident and singular was their conduct in this regard, that it became a matter of grave inquiry on one occasion and severe chiding on another.

"And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? And he said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days."

In the example and the teaching of Jesus Christ, prayer assumes its normal relation to God's person, God's movements and God's Son. Jesus Christ was essentially the teacher of prayer by precept and example. We have glimpses of His praying which, like indices, tell how full of prayer the pages, chapters and volumes of His life were. The epitome which covers not one segment only, but the whole circle of His life, and character, is pre-eminently that of prayer! "In the days of his flesh," the Divine record reads, "when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with strong crying and tears." The suppliant of all suppliants He was, the intercessor of all intercessors. In lowliest form He approached God, and with strongest pleas He prayed and supplicated.

Jesus Christ teaches the importance of prayer by His urgency to His disciples to pray. But He shows us more than that. He shows how far prayer enters into the purposes of God. We must ever keep in mind that the relation of Jesus Christ to God is the relation of asking and

giving, the Son ever asking, the Father ever giving. We must never forget that God has put the conquering, inheriting and expanding forces of Christ's cause in prayer. "ask of me, and I will give thee the heathen for thy inheritance, and the uttermost part of the earth for thy possession."

This was the clause embodying the royal proclamation and the universal condition when the Son was enthroned as the world's Mediator, and when He was sent on His mission of receiving grace and power. We very naturally learn from this how Jesus would stress praying as the one sole condition of His receiving His possession and inheritance.

Necessarily in this study on prayer, lines of thought will cross each other, and the same Scripture passage or incident will be mentioned more than once, simply because a passage may teach one or more truths. This is the case when we speak of the vast comprehensiveness of prayer. How all-inclusive Jesus Christ makes prayer! It has no limitations in extent or things! The promises to prayer are Godlike in their magnificence, wideness and universality. In their nature these promises have to do with God--with Him in their inspiration, creation and results. Who but God could say, "All things whatsoever ye ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive?" Who can command and direct "All things whatsoever" but God? Neither man nor chance nor the law of results are so far lifted above change, limitations or condition, nor have in them mighty forces which can direct and result all things, as to promise the bestowment and direction of all things.

Whole sections, parables and incidents were used by Christ to enforce the necessity and importance of prayer. His miracles are but parables of prayer. In nearly all of them prayer figures distinctly, and some features of it are illustrated. The Syrophenician woman is a pre-eminent illustration of the ability and the success of importunity in prayer. The case of blind Bartimæus has points of suggestion along the same line. Jairus and the Centurion illustrate and impress phases of prayer. The parable of the Pharisee and the publican enforce humility in prayer, declare the wondrous results of praying, and show the vanity and worthlessness of wrong praying. The failure to enforce church discipline and the readiness of violating the brotherhood, are all used to make an exhibit of far-reaching results of agreed praying, a record of which we have in Matthew 18:19.

It is of prayer in concert that Christ is speaking. Two agreed ones, two whose hearts have been keyed into perfect symphony by the Holy Spirit. Anything that they shall ask, it shall be done. Christ had been speaking of discipline in the Church, how things were to be kept in unity, and how the fellowship of the brethren was to be maintained, by the restoration of the offender or by his exclusion. Members who had been true to the brotherhood of Christ, and who were laboring to preserve that brotherhood unbroken, would be the agreed ones to make appeals to God in united prayer.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ lays down constitutional principles. Types and shadows are retired, and the law of spiritual life is declared. In this foundation law of the Christian system prayer assumes a conspicuous, if not a paramount, position. It is not only wide, all-commanding and comprehensive in its own sphere of action and relief, but it is ancillary to all duties. Even the one demanding kindly and discriminating judgment toward others, and also the royal injunction, the Golden Rule of action, these owe their being to prayer.

Christ puts prayer among the statutory promises. He does not leave it to natural law. The law of need, demand and supply, of helplessness, of natural instincts, or the law of sweet, high, attractive privilege--these howsoever strong as motives of action, are not the basis of praying. Christ puts it as spiritual law. Men must pray. Not to pray is not simply a privation, an omission, but a positive violation of law, of spiritual life, a crime, bringing disorder and ruin. Prayer is law world-wide and eternity-reaching.

In the Sermon on the Mount many important utterances are dismissed with a line or a verse, while the subject of prayer occupies a large space. To it Christ returns again and again. He bases the possibilities and necessities of prayer on the relation of father and child, the child crying for bread, and the father giving that for which the child asks. Prayer and its answer are in the relation of a father to his child. The teaching of Jesus Christ on the nature and necessity of prayer as recorded in His life, is remarkable. He sends men to their closets. Prayer must be a holy exercise, untainted by vanity, or pride. It must be in secret. The disciple must live in secret. God lives there, is sought there and is found there. The command of Christ as to prayer is that pride and publicity should be shunned. Prayer is to be in private. "But thou when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and shut thy door, and pray to thy Father in secret. And thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."

The Beatitudes are not only to enrich and adorn, but they are the material out of which spiritual character is built. The very first one of these fixes prayer in the very foundation of spiritual character, not simply to adorn, but to compose. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The word "poor" means a pauper, one who lives by begging. The real Christian lives on the bounties of another, whose bounties he gets by asking. Prayer then becomes the basis of Christian character, the Christian's business, his life and his living. This is Christ's law of prayer, putting it into the very being of the Christian. It is his first step, and his first breath, which is to color and to form all his after life. Blessed are the poor ones, for they only can pray.

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,

The Christian's native air;

His watchword at the gates of death;

He enters Heaven with prayer.

From praying Christ eliminates all self-sufficiency, all pride; and all spiritual values. The poor in spirit are the praying ones. Beggars are God's princes. They are God's heirs. Christ removes the rubbish of Jewish traditions and glosses from the regulations of the prayer altar.

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment:

"But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

"Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar and there rememberest that thy brother has aught against thee:

"Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first, be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

He who essays to pray to God with an angry spirit, with loose and irreverent lips, with an irreconciled heart, and with unsettled neighbourly scores, spends his labour for that which is worse than naught, violates the law of prayer, and adds to his sin.

How rigidly exacting is Christ's law of prayer! It goes to the heart, and demands that love be enthroned there, love to the brotherhood. The sacrifice of prayer must be seasoned and perfumed with love, by love in the inward parts. The law of prayer, its creator and inspirer, is love.

Praying must be done. God wants it done. He commands it. Man needs it and man must do it. Something must surely come of praying, for God engages that something shall come out of it, if men are in earnest and are persevering in prayer.

After Jesus teaches "Ask and it shall be given you," etc., He encourages real praying, and more praying. He repeats and avers with redoubled assurance, "for every one that asketh receiveth." No exception. "Every one." "He that seeketh, findeth." Here it is again, sealed and stamped with infinite veracity. Then closed and signed, as well as sealed, with Divine attestation, "To him that knocketh it shall be opened." Note how we are encouraged to pray by our relation to God!

"If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in Heaven give good things to them that ask him?"

The relation of prayer to God's work and God's rule in this world is most fully illustrated by Jesus Christ in both His teaching and His practice. He is first in every way and in everything. Among the rulers of the Church He is primary in a pre-eminent way. He has the throne. The golden crown is His in eminent preciousness. The white garments enrobe Him in pre-eminent whiteness and beauty. In the ministry of prayer He is a Divine example as well as the Divine Teacher. His example is affluent, and His prayer teaching abounds. How imperative the teaching of our Lord when He affirms that "men ought always to pray and not to faint!" and then presents a striking parable of an unjust judge and a poor widow to illustrate and enforce His teaching. It is a necessity to pray. It is exacting and binding for men always to be in prayer. Courage, endurance and perseverance are demanded that men may never faint in prayer. "And shall not God avenge his own elect that cry day and night unto him?"

This is His strong and indignant questioning and affirmation. Men must pray according to Christ's teaching. They must not get tired nor grow weary in praying. God's character is the assured surety that much will come of the persistent praying of true men.

Doubtless the praying of our Lord had much to do with the revelation made to Peter and the confession he made to Christ, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living god." Prayer mightily affects and molds the circle of our associates. Christ made disciples and kept them disciples by praying. His twelve disciples were much impressed by His

praying. Never man prayed like this man. How different His praying from the cold, proud, self-righteous praying which they heard and saw on the streets, in the synagogue, and in the Temple.