

VII. THE MINISTRY AND PRAYER

"Of course the preacher is above all others distinguished as a man of prayer. He prays as an ordinary Christian, else he were a hypocrite. He prays more than ordinary Christians else he were disqualified for the office he has undertaken. If you as ministers are not very prayerful you are to be pitied. If you become lax in sacred devotion, not only will you need to be pitied but your people also, and the day cometh in which you will be ashamed and confounded. Our seasons of fastings and prayer at the Tabernacle have been high days indeed; never has heaven's gate stood wider; never have our hearts been nearer the central glory."--Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

Preachers are God's leaders. They are divinely called to their holy office and high purpose and, primarily, are responsible for the condition of the Church. Just as Moses was called of God to lead Israel out of Egypt through the wilderness into the Promised Land, so, also, does God call His ministers to lead His spiritual Israel through this world unto the heavenly land. They are divinely commissioned to leadership, and are by precept and example to teach God's people what God would have them be. Paul's counsel to the young preacher Timothy is in point: "Let no man despise thy youth," he says, "but be thou an example of the believers, in word, conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity."

God's ministers shape the Church's character, and give tone and direction to its life. The prefacing sentence of the letter to each of the seven churches in Asia reads, "To the angel of the Church," seeming to indicate that the angel--the minister--was in the same state of mind and condition of life as the membership and that these "angels" or ministers were largely responsible for the spiritual condition of things existing in each Church. The "angel" in each case was the preacher, teacher, or leader. The first Christians knew full well and felt this responsibility. In their helplessness, consciously felt, they cried out, "And who is sufficient for things?" as the tremendous responsibility pressed upon their hearts and heads. The only reply to such a question was, "God only." So they were necessarily compelled to look beyond themselves for help and throw themselves on prayer to secure God. More and more as they prayed, did they feel their responsibility, and more and more by prayer did they get God's help. They realized that their sufficiency was of God.

Prayer belongs in a very high and important sense to the ministry. It takes vigour and elevation of character to administer the prayer-office. Praying prophets have frequently been at a premium in the history of God's people. In every age the demand has been for leaders in Israel who pray. God's watchmen must always and everywhere be men of prayer.

It ought to be no surprise for ministers to be often found on their knees seeking divine help under the responsibility of their call. These are the true prophets of the Lord, and these are they who stand as mouthpieces of God to a generation of wicked and worldly-minded men and women. Prayer preachers are boldest, the truest and the swiftest ministers of God. They mount up highest and are nearest to Him who has called them. They advance more rapidly and in Christian living are most like God.

In reading the record of the four evangelists, we cannot but be

impressed by the supreme effort made by our Lord to rightly instruct the twelve Apostles in the things which would properly qualify them for the tremendous tasks which would be theirs after He had gone back to the bosom of the Father. His solicitude was for the Church that she should have men, holy in life and in heart, and who would know full well from whence came their strength and power in the work of the ministry. A large part of Christ's teaching was addressed to these chosen Apostles, and the training of the twelve occupied much of His thought and consumed much of His time. In all that training, prayer was laid down as a basic principle.

We find the same thing to be true in the life and work of the Apostle Paul. While he addressed himself to the edification of the churches to whom he ministered and wrote, it was in his mind and purpose to rightly instruct and prepare ministers to whom would be committed the interests of God's people. The two epistles to Timothy were addressed to a young preacher, while that to Titus was also written to a young minister. And Paul's design appears to have been to give to each of them such instruction as would be needed rightly to do the work of the ministry to which they had been called by the Spirit of God. Underlying these instructions was the foundation-stone of prayer, since by no means would they be able to "show themselves approved unto God, workmen that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth," unless they were men of prayer.

The highest welfare of the Church of God on earth depends largely upon the ministry, and so Almighty God has always been jealous of His watchmen--His preachers. His concern has been for the character of the men who minister at His altars in holy things. They must be men who lean upon Him, who look to Him, and who continually seek Him for wisdom, help and power effectively to do the work of the ministry. And so He has designed men of prayer for the holy office, and has relied upon them successively to perform the tasks He has assigned them.

God's great works are to be done as Christ did them; are to be done, indeed, with increased power received from the ascended and exalted Christ. These works are to be done by prayer. Men must do God's work in God's way, and to God's glory, and prayer is a necessity to its successful accomplishment.

The thing far above all other things in the equipment of the preacher is prayer. Before everything else, he must be a man who makes a specialty of prayer. A prayerless preacher is a misnomer. He has either missed his calling, or has grievously failed God who called him into the ministry. God wants men who are not ignoramuses, who "study to show themselves approved." Preaching the Word is essential; social qualities are not to be underestimated, and education is good; but under and above all else, prayer must be the main plank in the platform of the man who goes forth to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to a lost and hungry world. The one weak spot in our Church institutions lies just here. Prayer is not regarded as being the primary factor in church life and activity, and other things, good in their places, are made primary. First things need to be put first, and the first thing in the equipment of a minister is prayer.

Our Lord is the pattern for all preachers, and, with Him, prayer was the law of life. By it He lived. It was the inspiration of His toil, the source of His strength, the spring of His joy. With our Lord prayer was no sentimental episode, nor an afterthought, nor a pleasing,

diverting prelude, nor an interlude, nor a parade or form. For Jesus, prayer was exacting, all-absorbing, paramount. It was the call of a sweet duty to Him, the satisfying of a restless yearning, the preparation for heavy responsibilities, and the meeting of a vigorous need. This being so, the disciple must be as his Lord, the servant as his Master. As was the Lord Himself, so also must be those whom He has called to be His disciples. Our Lord Jesus Christ chose His twelve Apostles only after He had spent a night in praying; and we may rest assured that He sets the same high value on those He calls to His ministry, in this our own day and time.

No feeble or secondary place was given to prayer in the ministry of Jesus. It comes first--emphatic, conspicuous, controlling. Of prayerful habits, of a prayerful spirit, given to long solitary communion with God, Jesus was above all else, a man of prayer. The crux of His earthly history, in New Testament terminology, is condensed to a single statement, to be found in Hebrews 5:7:

"Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears, unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared."

As was their Lord and Master, whose they are and whom they serve, so let His ministers be. Let Him be their pattern, their example, their leader and teacher. Much reference is made in some quarters about "following Christ," but it is confined to the following of Him in modes and ordinances, as if salvation were wrapped up in the specific way of doing a thing. "The path of prayer Thyselth hath trod," is the path along which we are to follow Him, and in no other. Jesus was given as a leader to the people of God, and no leader ever exemplified more the worth and necessity of prayer. Equal in glory with the Father, anointed and sent on His special mission by the Holy Spirit, His incarnate birth, His high commission, His royal anointing--all these were His but they did not relieve Him from the exacting claims of prayer. Rather did they tend to impose these claims upon Him with greater authority. He did not ask to be excused from the burden of prayer; He gladly accepted it, acknowledged its claims and voluntarily subjected Himself to its demands.

His leadership was preeminent, and His praying was preeminent. Had it not been, His leadership had been neither preeminent nor divine. If, in true leadership, prayer had been dispensable, then certainly Jesus could have dispensed with it. But He did not, nor can any of His followers who desire effectiveness in Christian activity do other than follow their Lord.

While Jesus Christ practiced praying Himself, being personally under the law of prayer, and while His parables and miracles were but exponents of prayer, He laboured directly to teach His disciples the specific art of praying. He said little or nothing about how to preach or what to preach. But He spent His strength and time in teaching men how to speak to God, how to commune with Him, and how to be with Him. He knew full well that he who has learned the craft of talking to God, will be well versed in talking to men. We may turn aside for a moment to observe that this was the secret of the wonderful success of the early Methodist preachers, who were far from being learned men. But with all their limitations, they were men of prayer, and they did great things for God.

All ability to talk to men is measured by the ability with which a preacher can talk to God for men. He "who ploughs not in his closet, will never reap in his pulpit."

The fact must ever be kept in the forefront and emphasized that Jesus Christ trained His disciples to pray. This is the real meaning of that saying, "The Training of the Twelve." It must be kept in mind that Christ taught the world's preachers more about praying than He did about preaching. Prayer was the great factor in the spreading of His Gospel. Prayer conserved and made efficient all other factors. Yet He did not discount preaching when He stressed praying, but rather taught the utter dependence of preaching on prayer.

"The Christian's trade is praying," declared Martin Luther. Every Jewish boy had to learn a trade. Jesus Christ learned two, the trade of a carpenter, and that of praying. The one trade subserved earthly uses; the other served His divine and higher purposes. Jewish custom committed Jesus when a boy to the trade of a carpenter; the law of God bound Him to praying from His earliest years, and remained with Him to the end.

Christ is the Christian's example, and every Christian must pattern after Him. Every preacher must be like his Lord and Master, and must learn the trade of praying. He who learns well the trade of praying masters the secret of the Christian art, and becomes a skilled workman in God's workshop, one who needeth not to be ashamed, a worker together with his Lord and Master.

"Pray without ceasing," is the trumpet call to the preachers of our time. If the preachers will get their thoughts clothed with the atmosphere of prayer, if they will prepare their sermons on their knees, a gracious outpouring of God's Spirit will come upon the earth.

The one indispensable qualification for preaching is the gift of the Holy Spirit, and it was for the bestowal of this indispensable gift that the disciples were charged to tarry in Jerusalem. The absolute necessity there is for receiving this gift if success is to attend the efforts of the ministry, is found in the command the first disciples had to stay in Jerusalem till they received it, and also with the instant and earnest prayerfulness with which they sought it. In obedience to their Lord's command to tarry in that city till they were endued with power from on high, they immediately, after He left them for heaven, entered on securing it by continued and earnest prayer. "These all with one accord, continued steadfastly in prayer, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brethren." To this same thing John refers in his First Epistle. "Ye have an unction from the Holy One," he says. It is this divine unction that preachers of the present day should sincerely desire, pray for, remaining unsatisfied till the blessed gift be richly bestowed.

Another allusion to this same important procedure is made by our Lord shortly after His resurrection, when He said to His disciples: "And ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you." At the same time Jesus directed the attention of His disciples to the statement of John the Baptist concerning the Spirit, the identical thing for which He had commanded them to tarry in the city of Jerusalem--"power from on high." Alluding to John the Baptist's words Jesus said, "For John indeed baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence." Peter at a later

date said of our Lord: "God anointed him with the Holy Ghost and with power."

These are the divine statements of the mission and ministry of the Holy Spirit to preachers of that day and the same divine statements apply with equal force to the preachers of this day. God's ideal minister is a God-called, divinely anointed, Spirit-touched man, separated unto God's work, set apart from secularities and questionable affairs, baptized from above, marked, sealed and owned by the Spirit, devoted to his Master and His ministry. These are the divinely-appointed requisites for a preacher of the Word; without them, he is inadequate, and inevitably unfruitful.

Today, there is no dearth of preachers who deliver eloquent sermons on the need and nature of revival, and advance elaborate plans for the spread of the kingdom of God, but the praying preachers are far more rare and the greatest benefactor this age can have is a man who will bring the preachers, the Church and the people back to the practice of real praying. The reformer needed just now is the praying reformer. The leader Israel requires is one who, with clarion voice, will call the ministry back to their knees.

There is considerable talk of the coming revival in the air, but we need to have the vision to see that the revival we need and the only one that can be worth having is one that is born of the Holy Spirit, which brings deep conviction for sin, and regeneration for those who seek God's face. Such a revival comes at the end of a season of real praying, and it is utter folly to talk about or expect a revival without the Holy Spirit operating in His peculiar office, conditioned on much earnest praying. Such a revival will begin in pulpit and pew alike, will be promoted by both preacher and lay-man working in harmony with God.

The heart is the lexicon of prayer; the life the best commentary on prayer, and the outward bearing its fullest expression. The character is made by prayer; the life is perfected by prayer. And this the ministry needs to learn as thoroughly as the laymen. There is but one rule for both.

So averse was the general body of Christ's disciples to prayer, having so little taste for it, and having so little sympathy with Him in the deep things of prayer, and its mightier struggles, that the Master had to select a circle of three more apt scholars--Peter, James and John--who had more of sympathy, and relish for this divine work, and take them aside that they might learn the lesson of prayer. These men were nearer to Jesus, fuller of sympathy, and more helpful to Him because they were more prayerful.

Blessed, indeed, are those disciples whom Jesus Christ, in this day, calls into a more intimate fellowship with Him, and who, readily responding to the call, are found much on their knees before Him. Distressing, indeed, is the condition of those servants of Jesus who, in their hearts, are averse to the exercise of the ministry of prayer.

All the great eras of our Lord, historical and spiritual, were made or fashioned by His praying. In like manner His plans and great achievements were born in prayer and impregnated by the spirit thereof. As was the Master, so also must His servant be; as his Lord did in the great eras of His life, so should the disciple do when faced by

important crises. "To your knees, O Israel!" should be the clarion-call to the ministry of this generation.

The highest form of religious life is attained by prayer. The richest revelations of God--Father, Son, and Spirit--are made, not to the learned, the great or the "noble" of earth, but men of prayer. "For ye see your calling, brethren, that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called," to whom God makes known the deep things of God, and reveals the higher things of His character, but to the lowly, inquiring, praying ones. And again must it be said, his is as true of preachers as of laymen. It is the spiritual man who prays, and to praying ones God makes His revelations through the Holy Spirit.

Praying preachers have always brought the greater glory to God, have moved His Gospel onward with its greatest, speediest rate and power. A non-praying preacher and a non-praying Church may flourish outwardly and advance in many aspects of their life. Both preacher and church may become synonyms for success, but unless it rest on a praying basis all success will eventually crumble into deadened life and ultimate decay.

"Ye have not because ye ask not," is the solution of all spiritual weakness both in the personal life and in the pulpit. Either that or it is, "Ye ask and receive not because ye ask amiss." Real praying lies at the foundation of all real success of the ministry in the things of God. The stability, energy and facility with which God's kingdom is established in this world are dependent upon prayer. God has made it so, and so God is anxious for men to pray. Especially is He concerned that His chosen ministers shall be men of prayer, and so gives that wonderful statement in order to encourage His ministers to pray, which is found in Matthew 6:9:

"But I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh, receiveth, and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened."

Thus both command and direct promise give accent to His concern that they shall pray. Pause and think on these familiar words. "Ask, and it shall be given you." That itself would seem to be enough to set us all, laymen and preachers, to praying, so direct, simple and unlimited. These words open all the treasures of heaven to us, simply by asking for them.

If we have not studied the prayers of Paul, primarily a preacher to the Gentiles, we can have but a feeble view of the great necessity for prayer, and how much it is worth in the life and the work of a minister of the Gospel. Furthermore, we shall have but a very limited view of the possibilities of the Gospel to enrich and make strong and perfect Christian character, as well as to equip preachers for their high and holy task. Oh, when will we learn the simple yet all important lesson that the one great thing needed in the life of a preacher to help him in his personal life, to keep his soul alive to God, and to give efficacy to the Word preached by him, is real, constant prayer!

Paul with prayer uppermost in his mind, assures the Colossians that "Epaphras is always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand complete and perfect in all the will of God." To this high state of grace, "complete in all the will of God," he prays they may come. So

prayer was the force which was to bring them to that elevated, vigorous and stable state of heart. This is in line with Paul's teaching to the Ephesians, "And he gave some pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ," where it is evidently affirmed that the whole work of the ministry is not merely to induce sinners to repent, but it is also the "perfecting of the saints." And so Epaphras "laboured fervently in prayers" for this thing. Certainly he was himself a praying man, in thus so earnestly praying for these early Christians.

The Apostles put out their force in order that Christians should honour God by the purity and consistency of their outward lives. They were to reproduce the character of Jesus Christ. They were to perfect His image in themselves, imbibe His temper and reflect His carriage in all their tempers and conduct. They were to be imitators of God as dear children, to be holy as He was holy. Thus even laymen were to preach by their conduct and character, just as the ministry preached with their mouths.

To elevate the followers of Christ to these exalted heights of Christian experience, they were in every way true in the ministry of God's Word, in the ministry of prayer, in holy consuming zeal, in burning exhortation, in rebuke and reproof. Added to all these, sanctifying all these, invigorating all these, and making all of them salutary, they centered and exercised constantly the force of mightiest praying. "Night and day praying exceedingly," that is, praying out of measure, with intense earnestness, superabundantly, beyond measure, exceeding abundantly.

"Night and day praying exceeding abundantly, that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith. Now God himself, and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you.

"And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you; to the end he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints."

It was after this fashion that these Apostles--the first preachers in the early Church--laboured in prayer. And only those who labour after the same fashion are the true successors of these Apostles. This is the true, the Scriptural "apostolical succession," the succession of simple faith, earnest desire for holiness of heart and life, and zealous praying. These are the things today which make the ministry strong, faithful and efficient, "workmen who needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

Jesus Christ, God's Leader and Commander of His people, lived and suffered under this law of prayer. All His personal conquests in His life on earth were won by obedience to this law, while the conquests which have been won by His representatives since He ascended to heaven, were gained only when this condition of prayer was heartily and fully met. Christ was under this one prayer condition. His Apostles were under the same prayer condition. His saints are under it, and even His angels are under it. By every token, therefore, preachers are under the same prayer law. Not for one moment are they relieved or excused from obedience to the law of prayer. It is their very life, the source of their power, the secret of their religious experience and communion with God.

Christ could do nothing without prayer. Christ could do all things by prayer. The Apostles were helpless without prayer--and were absolutely dependent upon it for success in defeating their spiritual foes. They could do all things by prayer.