

"MAKING PRAYER MORE MEANINGFUL"

INTRODUCTION

Luke, in his Gospel, tells us how on one occasion the disciples once came upon Jesus as he was praying. They were tremendously impressed by what they saw. For here was a concentration - an absorption - an abandon of which they had no experience. Their prayers, one would gather, were like the prayers of most people - well intentioned enough, but for the most part stereotyped, perfunctory, listless and cold. But this was different. Seeing Jesus on his knees in prayer was for them a revelation of what prayer could be and do. It awakened in them a desire to be able to pray - to get past formality and unreality, to come right into the very presence of God. And no sooner had our Lord risen from his knees than one of the disciples, echoing the thoughts and wishes of the others, exclaimed, "LORD, TEACH US HOW TO PRAY". The disciples saw, as they had never seen before, that prayer was an exercise calling for the development of proficiency and skill, that it was an art requiring deliberate and sustained cultivation.

DEVELOPMENT

This is a discovery that we too must make if there is to be any real substance to our own inner lives. Too many of us permit prayer to be a matter not of habit but of instinct. What I mean to suggest is that we pray when we are in need, when we are in danger or in some kind of crisis, when we are threatened by the onset of illness or bereavement or failure in some area of life. At such times we turn instinctively to God in something of the same sort of fashion that a frightened or hurt child will turn to a parent. Thus regarded, prayer can be said to be one of the most elementary and rudimentary characteristics of our life attitudes, and on its lower levels it is apt to be attended by two dangers.

TWO DANGERS

One danger is this - when we pray not by any fixed habit but simply by instinct our prayers are usually very self centered. The possibility is that they never get beyond the begging stage. And the other danger is this: when prayer follows only the prompting of instinct it is likely to be spasmodic and occasional. As soon as the danger disappears or the pressure is relieved or the sickness gone, the petitioning ceases. We stop praying and we don't take it up again until the next crisis comes into our lives.

Under such circumstances, prayer has little opportunity to grow in depth or range or spirituality. We should be ashamed if we have to literally be driven to our knees - if the one thing that drives us there is a crisis, a life situation that just about has us licked. And yet this is how it is with most of us. By the constitution of our natures we are praying creatures, but this instinct to pray is raw - uncultivated and undisciplined. What percentage of church people, do you suppose, make a daily practice of prayer. We have a great capacity for doing things in the church, for getting things done, but how is it with us when we get down on our knees. Some of us have never learned how to pray. Others have forgotten what they perhaps once learned. So much of our trouble stems from the fact that we are out of touch with God, and our deepest need is to renew our acquaintance with Him.

HOW IS IT TO BE DONE?

How does one go about this? How is it to be done? First of all, we need to recognize that the praying instinct which is part of our nature waits to be developed from an impulse into an exercise and from an exercise into an art. Ministers often hear people complain of their disappointing experiences with prayer. And yet one wonders how much of the disappointment is due to the fact that they take for granted that they can become conscious of God at any time, in any mood, with any sort of moral life behind them. A mistake is made at this point. It's impossible for a man who is selfish and superficial on his feet to suddenly become a saint on his knees. The apprehension of God is a moral and spiritual process and it calls for purity of heart, singleness of mind, a disciplined will.

I'm anxious for you to see that prayer is an exercise and an art as well as an instinct. That it demands just as much patience, industry and devotion as men give to painting, sculpture or music. That mastery comes only with long practice. Proficiency cannot be picked up in a few short and simple lessons. We are told that Brother Lawrence spent ten years teaching himself to pray - ten years of quiet, resolute, unceasing effort. We need to be honest with ourselves at this point. Do we really want to make prayer more meaningful in our lives? Are we prepared to pay the price which the mastery of the art involves?

IT TAKES TIME

For one thing, it takes time. If we're serious about making prayer more meaningful in our lives, then we must find some period within the twenty-four period for it. There are those who favour the morning. It's a matter of principle with them to begin the day with God, to speak with their Maker before they speak with their fellow man. Five or ten minutes - it may be no more - spent in recollecting the presence of God and in seeking his guidance and blessing set the tone for the entire day.

Some prefer the evening. For them, prayer is the last act of the day. By then the house is still, the children are asleep, their time is their own, the chances are that they won't be disturbed. They can read a chapter of the Bible. They can review the various activities of the day in which they have been involved. They can prepare themselves for rest and sleep by beseeching the benediction of God.

But whether morning or evening or some other time, time must be found for prayer, and if we are in earnest in making prayer more meaningful in our lives we shall see to it that it is systematic and habitual. This prayer instinct, no less than the hunger instinct, needs to be subjected to careful habits. The only way to get beyond impulsive, spasmodic prayer, prompted in the main by some sort of emergency or crisis, is to deliberately cultivate the practice of daily prayer, and, like the musician bent on the mastery of his instrument, to refuse to allow anything to interfere with the practice. If we are not prepared to give time to prayer, then we cannot expect to comprehend its nature or experience its power!

IT TAKES PERSEVERANCE

Yes, it takes time, and it also takes perseverance. In this, as in all other arts, success cannot be achieved without persistent application. You listen to a great violinist or a great pianist, and as you watch as well as listen, you see a man, an artist in complete command of his instrument, making it speak, putting into music what words are powerless to convey. You know that such great skill is the result of years of practice, of years spent in unremitting toil, toil that must not cease, even for a day, if the skill is to be sustained. And the testimony of the experts is that with prayer it is the same. He who would learn to pray must keep at it, day in and day out, year after year. There will be times when you are tempted to give it up, but you must resist that temptation with all of the strength at your command. If you want to make prayer more meaningful in your life, you must teach yourself to pray and make yourself pray.

One of the great saints of the church once said: "I came at least to this, that I would not rise and go away till I felt that I had an audience. And I sometimes felt as sure that I was having an audience as if He had been visibly present before me".

Something Edison wrote back in the 1920's is relevant in this connection:

"We don't know the millionth part of one percent about anything. We don't know what water is. We don't know what light is. We don't know what gravitation is. We don't know what enables us to keep on our feet when we stand up. We don't know what electricity is. We don't know what heat is. We don't know anything about magnetism. We have a lot of hypotheses about these things, but that is all. But we do not let our ignorance about all these things deprive us of their use. "

Apply the logic of that to prayer. It is admittedly a great mystery. It presents us with problems, theoretical and practical, in plenty. But this, it seems to me, is no reason for us to stop praying. We often discover by using. We learn by practice. To know more about the nature of prayer and to experience its power in our lives is, with steady persistence over the years, to keep on praying.

WIDEN THE RANGE OF OUR PRAYERS

This too needs to be said. As we give to developing the art of prayer, we would do well to give consideration to widening the range of our prayers. I think for most of us, petition is the main aspect of our prayers. We need, however, to get beyond this begging stage where we are telling God what we want and, as it were, seeking to impose our wills on His, making him as one writer has put it, a sort of celestial valet. This is not to suggest that there should be no element of petition in our prayers. Jesus taught us to pray for things. To pray for things that are in keeping with God's will for us is natural and right, but the farther that men advance in the art of prayer the less this sort of thing is involved.

To get beyond the begging stage in prayer we need to know and practice prayer in other forms. It is more than petition. It involves confession - revealing ourselves without reserve to God, making mention of specific sins, sins of thought and motive as well as of word and deed and humbly beseeching forgiveness. It is thanksgiving.....saying grace as Charles Lamb tells us he would often do, not only over meals, but over books and flowers and music and friends, praising God for the world in which He has placed us and the work he has given us to do, and for all that fills life with zest and adventure. It is intercession - lifting hands of prayer not only for ourselves, but for those who are our friends, for the church, for the nation, for the needy, for the sick.

Petition, confession, thanksgiving, intercession. And yet prayer need not be confined to any one of these forms. It may simply be thinking about something in the presence of God - spoken or silent, brief or sustained, a solitary vigil or, as in public worship, a social act - experiences in the heart of the country or amid the roar of a busy city street. It is prayer at this deepest level, not necessarily taking form in words but in an inner attitude of the soul, the lifting up of the mind to God, which is the secret and stimulus of the best Christian living.

CLOSING It was said of Thomas Chalmers that great preacher of Scotland - "Here was a man, bustling, striving, organizing, speaking and preaching with the dust and fire of the world on his clothes, but carrying his shrine with him everywhere." We think we have no time for prayer. We can make time. We think we have very little aptitude for prayer. We can acquire the aptitude. How little we know ourselves or our basic needs. To take the strain from our face and the tension from our nerves, to remove the irritability that makes us unattractive and hard to get along with, to accomplish twice our work in half the time, we need, like Chalmers, to keep a shrine and carry it about with us wherever we go.

LET US PRAY: Teach us, O God, to pray as thou wouldst have us pray. Give us the grace in the midst of the confusion and disquietude of this world, to stop from time to time whatever we are doing to think about thee. We ask this in the name of him who went out into the mountains alone to pray. Amen