

"ON LEARNING HOW TO PRAY"

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Luke tells how the disciples once came upon Jesus while he was praying. They were tremendously impressed by what they saw. Here was a concentration, an absorption of which they had no experience. Their prayer, one gathers, were like the prayers of most people - well intentioned, but for the most part stereotyped, perfunctory and cold. This was different. This was a revelation of what prayer could be and do. Seeing Jesus on his knees awakened in them a desire to be able to pray - to get past formality and unreality, right into the presence of God, and there pour out one's soul without inhibition or restraint. No sooner had he risen from his knees than one of the disciples, echoing the thought and the wish of others, exclaimed - "Lord, teach us how to pray". They 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

If there is to be any substance to our inner life, it is a discovery that we also must make. Too many of us permit prayer to be a matter not of habit but of instinct. We pray when we are in need - in danger or in a crisis situation - when we are threatened by the onset of illness or bereavement or failure. As such times we turn to God as instinctively as a hurt or frightened child seeks the refuge of its mother's arms. So regarded, prayer is the most rudimentary and characteristic of our life-attitudes, and on its lower levels it is attended by two dangers.

One danger is this. When we pray not by fixed habit, but by instinct our prayers are apt to be self-centered. The possibility is that they may never get beyond the begging stage. 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 passes or the crisis is relieved, the petitioning ceases. In such circumstances, what chance has prayer to grow in depth or range or spirituality. We should be ashamed if we have to be driven to our knees by a crisis situation before we pray. And yet, that is how it is with many of us.

PRAYING CREATURES

By the constitution of our nature, we are praying creatures. However, that instinct to pray is raw and uncultivated. Few church-goers make a regular habit of the practice of prayer. We have a great appetite for committee work and service projects, but how is it with us when we get down on our knees. Do we? Some of us have never really learned how to pray. Some have forgotten what we once learned. Our trouble may be that we are out of touch with God, and if we but realized it, our deepest need is to renew our acquaintance with Him.

HOW IS IT TO BE DONE

How is it to be done. First of all and fundamentally, by recognizing that the praying instinct which is native to each of us waits to be developed from an impulse into an exercise and from an exercise into an art.

People complain of their disappointing experiences when they pray. Yet 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. This is a mistake. It is impossible for a man who on his feet is superficial and selfish to become a great saint on his knees. The apprehension of God is a moral and spiritual process and calls for purity of heart, singleness of mind, a disciplined will. Prayer is an exercise and an art as well as an instinct. It demands patience, just as much patience, industry and devotion as men give to painting, sculpture or music. Mastery comes with long practice. Do we really want to learn to pray. Are we prepared to pay the price which the mastery of the art of prayer requires.

TIME In the second place, we need to remember that it takes time. At some period in the twenty-four hours a place must be found for it. There are those who favor the morning. It is a matter of principle with them to begin the day with God - to speak with their Maker before they speak with their friends and members of their family. The five minutes - it may be more - spent in recollecting the presence of God and in seeking His blessing and guidance set the tone for the entire day.

On the other hand, there are those who favor the evening. They make their time of prayer the last act of the day. By then the house is still, their time is their own, and it is not likely that they will be interrupted. They can pass in review the activity of the day and prepare themselves for rest and sleep by seeking the benediction of God. But whether morning or night or some other period in between, time must be found for prayer, and if we are in earnest and mean business we shall see that it is systematic and habitual. The prayer instinct - no less than the hunger instinct - needs to be subject to careful habits of self-discipline.

PERSEVERANCE In the third place, remember that it takes perseverance. In this as in all the other arts, success cannot be achieved unless there is some persistent application. You listen to a great violinist and as you watch as well as listen, you see a man in complete command of his instrument - making it speak - putting into music what words are powerless to convey. Did he achieve such skill with ease and without discipline and persistence? No. It is the result of years spent in toil and hard effort and daily practice. 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 in and year out. Many a time he will be tempted to give up but the temptation to relax must be resisted.

When I was a student in Edinburgh, there was a minister, a professor in New College by the name of Dr. James Stewart. Many consider him to be one of the greatest preachers in the English tongue. In addition to his class room lectures, he would also preach in various pulpits around the city of Edinburgh. Not only a great and gifted preacher, but also a great spirit. I remember those moments before his lectures in the class room when in his shy and quiet way would say, "Let us pray". And I can well remember on leaving the church building where he preached overhearing persons saying, "The sermon was good, but it's the prayer, I shall remember". When James Stewart said, "Let us Pray" you knew that before long, if you had any spiritual sensitivity at all, you would soon be ushered into the holy of holies.

Something that Thomas Edison wrote back in the 1920's is relevant in our discussion of prayer:

"We don't know the millionth part of one per cent 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 hypothesis about these things, but that is all. But we do not let our ignorance about all these things deprive us of their use."

Apply that logic to the matter of prayer. It is a great mystery for us to take in. It presents us with problems - practical and theoretical. But that is no reason why we should not keep on praying. We discover by using. We learn by participation and not observation. We learn by practice. To know more about the nature of prayer and to experience more of its power the thing to do is, with steady persistence, to keep on praying.

OTHER FORMS If we are to keep on praying, we shall have to widen the range of our prayers. We shall have to get them beyond the 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 put it - a sort of "celestial valet". To pray for material things is natural and right, but the farther men go in the art of prayer, the less they do it. Our prayers should be more than petition. We need to practice prayer in other forms.

CONFESSION It is confession - revealing ourselves without reserve to God, making mention of specific sins, sins of thought and motive as well as of word and deed. We should seek forgiveness in our prayers for sins committed and sins of omission.

THANKSGIVING It is thanksgiving. Saying grace, as Charles Lamb tells us he was accustomed, not only over meals but also 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 the truth he has permitted us to learn and for all that fills life with zest and adventure.

INTERCESSION It is intercession - lifting hands of prayer not only for ourselves, but for those who call us friend, for the sick, for the church, for the nation, for people in other nations, for needy people and causes everywhere.

Petition - confession - thanksgiving - intercession. Prayer need not be confined to any of these forms. It may simply be thinking about something consciously in the presence of God.

SUMMARY Prayer then is any form of exposure of our life to God. It may be spoken or silent, brief or sustained, a solitary vigil, or as in public worship, a social act, experienced in the heart of the country or amid the roar of a busy street. It is prayer at this deepest level, not necessarily taking the 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 of Christian living.

Thomas Chalmers, that great preacher of Scotland, had it said of him:

"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 have no time for prayer. We can make time. We think we have no aptitude for prayer. We can acquire the aptitude. How little we know about our basic moods. To take the strain from our face and the tension from our nerves, to remove the irritability which makes us unattractive to family, and associates, 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.

In the words of the closing hymn:

"O Thou, by whom we come to God,
The life, the truth, the way,
The path of prayer thyself hast trod:
Lord - teach us how to pray"

LET US PRAY

O God, who hast taught us to come apart from the world in order to renew our spiritual energies, help us to set aside all our cares and concerns that we may look only upon the brightness of thy Being, and think only of thy power and love.

Ease the tensions of our bodies and set our minds at rest, that we may be ready to receive that which thou art so ready to give. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. Amen