

## SUNDAY MORNING NO. 17

Epistle to Philemon. —In this brief epistle, there is a matter twice referred to, which deserves our most serious consideration. The first time it is mentioned is in the fourth verse:

*“I thank my God, **making mention of thee always in my prayers;**”* and again, in the 22<sup>nd</sup> verse:

*“I trust that **through your prayers,** I shall be given unto you.”*

You will recollect that, on one occasion, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, as if they felt their incapacity or ignorance of how to approach God. Jesus, in answer to their request, said—

*“When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do, for they think they shall be heard for their much speaking; but when ye pray, say after this manner;”*

And he gave them the brief form of prayer which is called “*The Lord’s Prayer.*” The first feature, then, of acceptable prayer is brevity. Prolivity of petition is the very opposite of real prayer; for what is prayer? It is the request of limited intelligence to infinite intelligence, — the address of a feeble creature to One who does not require to be talked aloud to in order to hear, and who does not require to be importuned with many words in order to be moved. The gods of the heathen were represented in an opposite light. Their worshippers were told that the longest and most energetic devotions were likely to be most effectual.

The difference between the two kinds of worship were never more signally illustrated than in the case of Elijah and the false prophets, on Mount Carmel. There had been three years and a half of famines because the nation had apostatised from the God of Abraham, and had gone aside after the gods of the Canaanites. At the end of three years and a half, Elijah sought to bring the nation to its senses upon the question. Meeting Ahab, Ahab said—

*“Art thou he that troublest Israel?”*

And Elijah replied—

*“No; it is thou who art the trouble of Israel, in having turned the nation after idols.”*

The result of the interview was that Ahab undertook to gather the representatives of the nation together to Mount Carmel with the false prophets, and to submit the matter in controversy to a public test. The god that should answer by fire was to be recognised as the Lord of Israel. In due time, the false prophets and Elijah met; and Elijah gave the false prophets the first chance. He set them to work at once to call upon Baal; and they were very earnest in their entreaties, and, without doubt, sincere. They evidently thought Baal a reality, and so they cried aloud and shouted; and as the time went on and no answer came, they began to get excited and frantic in their exertions; they cut themselves with knives and jumped upon the altars, and Elijah taunted them. He ironically told them to pray on and pray louder; perhaps their god was asleep, or on a journey, or was hard of hearing.

After they had exerted themselves in vain all day long, Elijah said “*Come near.*” They came near, and, at his command, they dug a trench round his altar, and poured water over it three times, till the trench was filled, and the whole place in a swim. This done, he simply knelt down and said—

*“Lord God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Israel; let it be known, this day, that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again.”*

Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. The people seeing this, fell on their faces, and exclaimed—

*“Yahweh, he is the Elohim! Yahweh, he is the Elohim!!”*

Elijah then gave commandment to take the false prophets, and let not one of them escape; and he received them from the hands of the people—the whole of the 400—and slew them, — murdered them, as some people would say; but killing is not murder when God commands. There will be murder of this sort, on a large scale, when Elijah come again; for Elijah will again appear, as saith the prophet:

*“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.”—*

*(Mal. 4:5.)*

This prophecy was partly fulfilled in John the Baptist; for you will recollect that when the disciples said to Jesus,

*“Why say the Scribes, Elias must first come?”*

He said to them,

*“Elias hath already come, and they have done to him whatsoever they listed.”*

But though John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah, (Luke 1:17), the fact does not displace the coming of the real Elijah of Ahab’s day, for Jesus said again,

*“Verily, Elias truly **shall first come** and restore all things.”*

Putting the two statements together—Elijah has come, and Elijah truly shall first come—we gather that John the Baptist was in relation to the first advent, what Elias will be in relation to the second. Elijah did not die; being a man of God in a thorough sense, God did not allow him to see death, but withdrew him from the scene whilst in the act of bringing Israel (that is, the ten tribes) back to God. Very shortly afterwards, the ten tribes were carried away beyond the river Euphrates, and there they have remained to this day in a completely disorganised state. But Elijah will return and resume his work, and restore the lost tribes to the land and the wisdom of their fathers.

Elijah’s prayer shows that we have no need to pray long. Realise this fact, that God’s mind is far more susceptible than ours, and that he is more willing to give good things than we are to ask them, and then we realise how in a few words we may pray effectually. This effectualness of praying will not consist in the tone in which our words may be uttered. What an abomination to read in the newspapers of so-and-so “intoning the prayers!” A pious tone is one of the absurd and nauseous features of the system that happens to be in vogue in the days in which we live.

A man of true godliness—a man who has got his religion from the Bible, and not from the pulpit, is just as sensible in his dealings with divine things as with human things. He is no brother to the man who puts on a pious face when religion comes on the board, and begins to talk in a “religious” accent. True religion has nothing to do with cant. A religious tone and manner is the dress of hypocrisy or superstition. It is true that a person under the influence of religious feeling will show it. The organ of veneration excited in the mesmeric state will throw the subject on his knees, fix his face in a sublime expression, raise his hands in an attitude of entreaty, and impart to the very tones of his voice a subdued expression which is very different from his ordinary utterance. This is the language of that faculty in our nature, which, enlightened by the truth, gives power of approach to God, but it has no affinity with the abominable cant and pietism of the hypocrite.

Let us be short in our prayers; there should be no prolixity; brevity and intensity should be their characteristics. It is no prayer at all if you merely say words. Prayer is a concentration of the mind upon the Deity in adoration, gratitude, or entreaty. This cannot be attained without words, but you may use words without the act of true devotion; neither can it

be attained without understanding. Understanding is the basis of our relations with men; much more is it so with God. We must become enlightened with regard to the fact that he is, and that he is everywhere present—that no distance is any barrier to the divine ear. Wherever we pray, we ought to feel that God is there; because we know that—

*“He is not far from everyone of us,”* (Acts 17:27), but *“besets us before and behind.”*—(Psalm 139:5.)

If a man fail to realise this, he fails in the first qualification of acceptable and profitable prayer. God is a spirit (John 4:24), and fills heaven and earth. —(Jer. 23:24.) Although he is personally in light that no man can approach, (1 Tim. 6:16), His mind is so unlimited in grasp, that it matters not that ten thousand persons pray to Him at the same time; he can notice all. You cannot get away from His presence. To communicate with Him, you have only to turn your thoughts to Him. Realise that you are speaking to God, and that He hears, and you will then, if you are righteous, pray the effectual, fervent prayer that availeth much.

As to the subject of prayer, about which some people are at a loss sometimes. Jesus has told us all we need care to know, in the model prayer given to his disciples. You will find that it contains everything about which we may or can pray. It is addressed to *“Our Father, who art in heaven.”* That address does not occur again in the prayer; there is no need of repeating the name of God as the modern heathen do. Such repetition indicates that the person praying is standing afar off, and feels a difficulty in securing God’s attention. Jesus fixes our attention on the fact of the Father being in heaven as the basis of all prayer; therefore let us grasp this to begin with, that though He is everywhere present, the centre of His presence and power is away from the earth in the starry vastitude around us. Thither our minds should rise in prayer. Do not, as it were, pray to anyone in the room in which you kneel; let your thoughts mount to heaven.

Remember that there is something in you and about you which connects you with the Father; far off as he personally is, and that something is what the Scriptures describe as His spirit, and which the natural-man philosopher discourses about as the “electric fluid” and “the ether.” But remember also this, that God hears only the prayers of those who are pleasing in His sight. The prayers of the wicked are an abomination, and there are wicked are wicked people who have the name of Christ upon them. He only hears those who honour Him.

*“To the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure; to the merciful man Thou wilt show Thyself merciful; to the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward.”*—(Psalm 18:25,26.)

God heareth the righteous—

*“His ear is open to their cry;”* (Psalm 34:15),

But it is shut to those who are displeasing to Him. They may pray, but He takes no notice, though He knows their words of course, just as He knows of the sparrow’s fall. People who choose to walk according to their own devices, He leaves to their own devices.

*“Commit thy way unto the Lord, and He shall direct thy steps:”*

If you do not, He won’t. How important then to know you are walking in the course that is well pleasing to God!

But it may be said, how can we tell when this is the case? Well, we cannot expect God to send us a special message how we stand in His regards; that is hereafter to be declared when the judgment is set. Nevertheless, He has done all that is necessary to enable us to know, and if we have not the answer of a good conscience, it is our own fault. He has declared His mind most minutely by the prophets and apostles—

*“Line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.”*

All we have to do is to make ourselves familiar with what He has said—daily waiting at wisdom’s gates, watching at the posts of her doors. If we are living in neglect of His word and allowing the things of this life to drive it into the corner, our ignorance, uncertain

conscience, and unanswered prayers are the due reward of our folly. But if we are like the man spoken of by David, whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law doth meditate day and night, and whose steps are conformed thereto, we may know that the Father is well pleased with us, and that He will listen to our prayers and do what we require of Him.

Some starving creatures doubt the utility of prayer. They cannot see any good in it, and live in neglect of it. This shows that they have not yet risen to the position of real children in Christ, but are grovelling in the mire of the natural man. We must not take our cue from such, but resist them—steadfast in the faith. We must be guided in the matter by Jesus, who was in the bosom of the Father when he gave his disciples this prayer; and who was expressly sent to declare to us the mind of the Father. He directs us to pray, and tells us how to pray. The first thing that he puts into the mouth of an acceptable worshipper is,

*“Hallowed be thy name.”*

What does this mean? The name of God is equivalent to God himself. The name of a man is the symbol of the man; and any slight to the name is an insult to the man himself. *“Hallowed”* means sacred, held in great reverence. This is what God’s must be by us. David says of the Deity,

*“Holy and reverend is His name;”*

And it was a precept to Israel that they were not to take His name in vain. The first lesson, then, that Jesus teaches with regard to our approach to God, is that it ought never to be undertaken without a reverential sense of His greatness and holiness. To realise this, we have only to use our brains. We can see that God is the only power—that all things about us are but the creations of His eternal energy. His greatness is beyond the reach of our puny intellects. He is from everlasting to everlasting. He was before all things—before any part of the splendid universe we now see; and when we consider the perfection of His wisdom, the excellence of His goodness, and the greatness of His might, we are enabled to feel that in our approaches to His presence, we can only be acceptable to him if we carry with us a due sense of His supremacy and our own utter nothingness.

Having acknowledged the greatness of *“Our Father in heaven,”* we are permitted to say *“Thy kingdom come.”* This is in natural sequence to the first sentiment. What is the highest desire of the mind, filled with the fear and the love of God, but that His will may become law on earth? Such a mind feels at present as David expresses it, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. A state of society prevails in which God is almost unknown, and His will universally set at nought, in consequence of which, joy is no dweller with the sons of men. What can a lover of God desire but this, that the time may come, and soon come, when the will of God will be as much considered in all transactions on earth as it is in heaven; and since we know that the means He has appointed to bring about that state of things is His kingdom, the most natural petition we can present is—

*“Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”*

Then comes *“daily bread.”* The spiritual is first in acceptable prayer; ascription to the Deity, based upon a rational apprehension of His greatness, is followed by the prayer that His will and love may become the rule and delight to the world. Then come the matters pertaining to our individual fortunes in the present time. God first, the future next, then the present: this is the divine order of ideas.

*“Give us this day our daily bread.”*

In this, Jesus teaches that our temporal concerns are not too insignificant to be the subject of prayer; indeed, how can they be insignificant to us? Why, they constitute the stepping-stone to the things that are coming. No man can attain to the kingdom of God until he has passed through a period of probation now. Therefore the things pertaining to that probation are most important. It is not God’s will that we should starve, that is to say, for starvation’s sake. He may place men in straits sometimes for their good, or allow them to be put, like Jeremiah,

into a loathsome pit for his word's sake; that is another thing. If men are cast into prison for Christ's sake, they will, if they are true sons of God, rejoice like the apostles that they are counted worthy to suffer for his name. But apart from this sort of thing, God doesn't wish that we should be ill-fed and ill-clothed; the very opposite, for Paul speaks of such blessings as things that—

*"God hath created to be received with thankfulness of them which believe and know the truth."*—(1 Tim. 4:3);

And of God he speaks thus:

*"He giveth us richly **all things to enjoy**."*—(1 Tim. 6:17.)

Also in writing to the Corinthians, in the chapter in which he says that God loves a cheerful giver, he says—

*"And God is able to make all grace abound toward you that ye **always having all sufficiency in all things**, may abound to every good work."*

Consequently it is compatible with the truth to have abundance, if that abundance is used faithfully *"as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."* (1 Pet. 4:10.) All depends on this. If a man use it for his own aggrandisement, he is an unfaithful steward, for the wealth that is entrusted to him is not his own. He is not even himself his own; he and all he has are the property of Christ who will hold him responsible for the disposal of his life. If he keep his abundance with a close hand—refusing to render the assistance it is in his power to render to the needy, or to the struggling cause of the truth, he will be pronounced unworthy of his trust and stripped of all he has, and cut off from the greater riches of the age to come. God is willing that we should have enough and to spare; therefore, Jesus instructs us to pray,

*"Give us this day our daily bread."*

And God can give it; only we must have faith.

The man who thinks the provision of livelihood a thing in his own hands entirely, in which God will take no part, argues irrationally, disbelieves the testimony and harms himself. Upon how many circumstances beyond control does our living depend at present, and although God won't send an angel to lift a piece of bread from the ground which we can stoop to pick up for ourselves, yet what we cannot effect for ourselves, He will be entreated to do by the prayer of faith which makes the divine will the basis of all petition. It may depend upon the mood of a certain man; God has the hearts of all men in His hand and can turn them whithersoever He will. He can so attemper the mind of the man as that our bread may be secured; or how often does it depend on the accident of meeting a certain person, which meeting God can easily bring about. If you only saw mesmeric operations, you would be able to understand how God has everything under His control. When the mesmerist has a man under his control, he can stop him by the mere force of his will, while he is in the act of walking, and make him turn round and walk in the opposite direction. This helps us to see unlimited scope for the operation of divine providence. All things are possible with God; it only requires faith. *"Give us this day our daily bread, we believe thou canst and wilt."* If you do not believe that, you had better not pray, for God is insulted by faithless prayer.

Then come the words,

*"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us."*

In this, Jesus recognises the fact that while in the flesh, we are liable to fall into transgression, and he teaches that these transgressions may be forgiven, but you will observe that this privilege is burdened with a condition which Jesus elsewhere (Matt. 21:18-35) gives us to understand will be stringently enforced—God will only grant forgiveness to those who do for others what they ask for themselves. Jesus adds—

*"If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*

*"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."*

This implies that we are to believe that our circumstances are so entirely in the power of God that if we ask him and are very anxious to be kept in the right way, and to be protected from evil, our request will be granted. Would Christ have taught his disciples to pray these prayers, if they were not prayers to be answered? The reason of all prayer is that all things belong to God and are at his disposal, and that He delights to be entreated as to their disposal in behalf of those whose heart is perfect towards him.

Well, here is a model prayer given by Jesus himself, and therefore one which we should all do well to follow. At the same time, we need not restrict ourselves to the very words of it. It is rather given as a sample of the kind of prayer we ought to pray. "*After this manner*" is Christ's indication of the use he intended us to make of it. The continual use of a set form of words is apt to extinguish that true prayerfulness that is conscious of addressing the Deity. The choice of words should be left to the impulse created by enlightenment. In our intercourse with men, we should dislike being addressed in a stereotyped form of words. We most appreciate the spontaneous and unstudied expressions of intelligence and friendship, and the Scriptures reveal that God is not less concerned as to the manner of our approach. The "*Lord's prayer*" may be used in its very words if the spirit so incline and the heart go warmly with the words, but the best use we can put it to is to fix it before our eyes as a standard of guidance as to how we ought to pray and what we may pray for, leaving the wording to the inspiration of scripturally begotten prayerfulness.

Another point of importance not specially brought out in the Lord's Prayer is that we ought to pray often. Our minds are so feeble that we are liable to forget the things that are out of sight. We remember best the things that we have always to do with. Things out of sight die out of memory; now, God is out of sight. In prayer we keep him in sight, and are enabled to "*endure as seeing Him who is invisible.*" We must therefore pray without ceasing. This does not mean that we are always to be praying: it means that our praying must be a matter of continual practice. Let it be always attended to, like the reading of the word. We have an illustration of what is acceptable in the matter in the case of Cornelius, of whom it is said that he prayed to God always; and his prayers came up for a memorial before God, and led to his being guided into the way of truth. Now, he was commander of a hundred men, and had to attend to military business. Consequently he prayed "*always,*" not in the sense of non-intermission, as a mad woman once supposed, but in the sense of daily practice. Daniel is another example of acceptable practice in the matter of prayer. He was "*a man greatly beloved,*" and "*he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God.*"—(Dan. 6:10.) David, "*the man after God's own heart,*" says of himself—

*"Seven times in a day do I praise Thee, because of Thy righteous judgments."*—(Psalm 119:164.)

Then we find that Jesus himself frequently withdrew himself from both the people and his own disciples, and spent all night in prayer to God. Let us then "*continue instant in prayer.*" The practice will make us feel acquainted with God, and greatly assist us in ordering our conversation aright before him. It will build up a divinely-approved character upon the foundation laid by the word, and qualify us for the inheritance of the saints in light, in which God will be over and in all—blessed for evermore.

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By Bro. Robert Roberts