

PRAYER AND IMPORTUNITY

"How glibly we talk of praying without ceasing! Yet we are quite apt to quit, if our prayer remained unanswered but one week or month! We assume that by a stroke of His arm or an action of His will, God will give us what we ask. It never seems to dawn on us, that He is the Master of nature, as of grace, and that, sometimes He chooses one way, and sometimes another in which to do His work. It takes years, sometimes, to answer a prayer and when it is answered, and we look backward we can see that it did. But God knows all the time, and it is His will that we pray, and pray, and still pray, and so come to know, indeed and of a truth, what it is to pray without ceasing." -- ANON.

OUR Lord Jesus declared that "men ought always to pray and not to faint," and the parable in which His words occur, was taught with the intention of saving men from faint-heartedness and weakness in prayer. Our Lord was seeking to teach that laxity must be guarded against, and persistence fostered and encouraged. There can be no two opinions regarding the importance of the exercise of this indispensable quality in our praying.

Importunate prayer is a mighty movement of the soul toward God. It is a stirring of the deepest forces of the soul, toward the throne of heavenly grace. It is the ability to hold on, press on, and wait. Restless desire, restful patience, and strength of grasp are all embraced in it. It is not an incident, or a performance, but a passion of soul. It is not a want, half-needed, but a sheer necessity.

The wrestling quality in importunate prayers does not spring from physical vehemence or fleshly energy. It is not an impulse of energy, not a mere earnestness of soul; it is an inwrought force, a faculty implanted and aroused by the Holy Spirit. Virtually, it is the intercession of the Spirit of God, in us; it is, moreover, "the effectual, fervent prayer, which availeth much." The Divine Spirit informing every element within us, with the energy of His own striving, is the essence of the importunity which urges our praying at the mercy-seat, to continue until the fire falls and the blessing descends. This wrestling in prayer may not be boisterous nor vehement, but quiet, tenacious and urgent. Silent, it may be, when there are no visible outlets for its mighty forces.

Nothing distinguishes the children of God so clearly and strongly as prayer. It is the one infallible mark and test of being a Christian. Christian people are prayerful, the worldly-minded, prayerless. Christians call on God; worldlings ignore God, and call not on His Name. But even the Christian had need to cultivate continual prayer. Prayer must be habitual, but much more than a habit. It is duty, yet one which rises far above, and goes beyond the ordinary implications of the term. It is the expression of a relation to God, a yearning for Divine communion. It is the outward and upward flow of the inward life toward its original fountain. It is an assertion of the soul's paternity, a claiming of the sonship, which links man to the Eternal.

Prayer has everything to do with moulding the soul into the image of God, and has everything to do with enhancing and enlarging the measure of Divine grace. It has everything to do with bringing the soul into complete communion with God. It has everything to do with enriching, broadening and maturing the soul's experience of God. That man cannot possibly be called a Christian, who does not pray. By no possible

pretext can he claim any right to the term, nor its implied significance. If he do not pray, he is a sinner, pure and simple, for prayer is the only way in which the soul of man can enter into fellowship and communion with the Source of all Christlike spirit and energy. Hence, if he pray not, he is not of the household of faith.

In this study however, we turn our thought to one phase of prayer -- that of importunity; the pressing of our desires upon God with urgency and perseverance; the praying with that tenacity and tension which neither relaxes nor ceases until its plea is heard, and its cause is won.

He who has clear views of God, and Scriptural conceptions of the Divine character; who appreciates his privilege of approach unto God; who understands his inward need of all that God has for him -- that man will be solicitous, outspoken and importunate. In Holy Writ, the duty of prayer, itself, is advocated in terms which are only barely stronger than those in which the necessity for its importunity is set forth. The praying which influences God is declared to be that of the fervent, effectual outpouring of a righteous man. That is to say, it is prayer on fire, having no feeble, flickering flame, no momentary flash, but shining with a vigorous and steady glow.

The repeated intercessions of Abraham for the salvation of Sodom and Gomorrah present an early example of the necessity for, and benefit deriving from importunate praying. Jacob, wrestling all night with the angel, gives significant emphasis to the power of a dogged perseverance in praying, and shows how, in things spiritual, importunity succeeds, just as effectively as it does in matters relating to time and sense.

As we have noted, elsewhere, Moses prayed forty days and forty nights, seeking to stay the wrath of God against Israel, and his example and success are a stimulus to present-day faith in its darkest hour. Elijah repeated and urged his prayer seven times ere the raincloud appeared above the horizon, heralding the success of his prayer and the victory of his faith. On one occasion Daniel though faint and weak, pressed his case three weeks, ere the answer and the blessing came.

Many nights during His earthly life did the blessed Saviour spend in prayer. In Gethsemane He presented the same petition, three times, with unabated, urgent, yet submissive importunity, which involved every element of His soul, and issued in tears and bloody sweat. His life crises were distinctly marked, his life victories all won, in hours of importunate prayer. And the servant is not greater than his Lord.

The Parable of the Importunate Widow is a classic of insistent prayer. We shall do well to refresh our remembrance of it, at this point in our study:

"And He spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint; saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man; and there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of my adversary. And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them? I tell you He will avenge them speedily."

This parable stresses the central truth of importunate prayer. The widow presses her case till the unjust judge yields. If this parable does not teach the necessity for importunity, it has neither point nor instruction in it. Take this one thought away, and you have nothing left worth recording. Beyond all cavil, Christ intended it to stand as an evidence of the need that exists, for insistent prayer.

We have the same teaching emphasized in the incident of the Syrophenician woman, who came to Jesus on behalf of her daughter. Here, importunity is demonstrated, not as a stark impertinence, but as with the persuasive habiliments of humility, sincerity, and fervency. We are given a glimpse of a woman's clinging faith, a woman's bitter grief, and a woman's spiritual insight. The Master went over into that Sidonian country in order that this truth might be mirrored for all time -- there is no plea so efficacious as importunate prayer, and none to which God surrenders Himself so fully and so freely.

The importunity of this distressed mother, won her the victory, and materialized her request. Yet instead of being an offence to the Saviour, it drew from Him a word of wonder, and glad surprise. "O woman, great is thy faith! Be it unto thee, even as thou wilt."

He prays not at all, who does not press his plea. Cold prayers have no claim on heaven, and no hearing in the courts above. Fire is the life of prayer, and heaven is reached by flaming importunity rising in an ascending scale.

Reverting to the case of the importunate widow, we see that her widowhood, her friendlessness, and her weakness counted for nothing with the unjust judge. Importunity was everything. "Because this widow troubleth me," he said, "I will avenge her speedily, lest she weary me." Solely because the widow imposed upon the time and attention of the unjust judge, her case was won.

God waits patiently as, day and night, His elect cry unto Him. He is moved by their requests a thousand times more than was this unjust judge. A limit is set to His tarrying, by the importunate praying of His people, and the answer richly given. God finds faith in His praying child -- the faith which stays and cries -- and He honours it by permitting its further exercise, to the end that it is strengthened and enriched. Then He rewards it by granting the burden of its plea, in plenitude and finality.

The case of the Syrophenician woman previously referred to is a notable instance of successful importunity, one which is eminently encouraging to all who would pray successfully. It was a remarkable instance of insistence and perseverance to ultimate victory, in the face of almost insuperable obstacles and hindrances. But the woman surmounted them all by heroic faith and persistent spirit that were as remarkable as they were successful. Jesus had gone over into her country, "and would have no man know it." But she breaks through His purpose, violates His privacy, attracts His attention, and pours out to Him a poignant appeal of need and faith. Her heart was in her prayer.

At first, Jesus appears to pay no attention to her agony, and ignores her cry for relief. He gives her neither eye, nor ear, nor word. Silence, deep and chilling, greets her impassioned cry. But she is not turned aside, nor disheartened. She holds on. The disciples, offended

at her unseemly clamour, intercede for her, but are silenced by the Lord's declaring that the woman is entirely outside the scope of His mission and His ministry.

But neither the failure of the disciples to gain her a hearing nor the knowledge -- despairing in its very nature -- that she is barred from the benefits of His mission, daunt her, and serve only to lend intensity and increased boldness to her approach to Christ. She came closer, cutting her prayer in twain, and falling at His feet, worshipping Him, and making her daughter's case her own cries, with pointed brevity -- "Lord, help me!" This last cry won her case; her daughter was healed in the self-same hour. Hopeful, urgent, and unwearied, she stays near the Master, insisting and praying until the answer is given. What a study in importunity, in earnestness, in persistence, promoted and propelled under conditions which would have disheartened any but an heroic, a constant soul.

In these parables of importunate praying, our Lord sets forth, for our information and encouragement, the serious difficulties which stand in the way of prayer. At the same time He teaches that importunity conquers all untoward circumstances and gets to itself a victory over a whole host of hindrances. He teaches, moreover, that an answer to prayer is conditional upon the amount of faith that goes to the petition. To test this, He delays the answer. The superficial pray-er subsides into silence, when the answer is delayed. But the man of prayer hangs on, and on. The Lord recognizes and honours his faith, and gives him a rich and abundant answer to his faith-evidencing, importunate prayer.

"Two-thirds of the praying we do, is for that which would give us the greatest possible pleasure to receive. It is a sort of spiritual self-indulgence in which we engage, and as a consequence is the exact opposite of self-discipline. God knows all this, and keeps His children asking. In process of time -- His time -- our petitions take on another aspect, and we, another spiritual approach. God keeps us praying until, in His wisdom, He deigns to answer. And no matter how long it may be before He speaks, it is, even then, far earlier than we have a right to expect or hope to deserve." -- ANON.

THE tenor of Christ's teachings, is to declare that men are to pray earnestly -- to pray with an earnestness that cannot be denied. Heaven has harkening ears only for the whole-hearted, and the deeply-earnest. Energy, courage, and persistent perseverance must back the prayers which heaven respects, and God hears. All these qualities of soul, so essential to effectual praying, are brought out in the parable of the man who went to his friend for bread, at midnight. This man entered on his errand with confidence. Friendship promised him success. His plea was pressing: of a truth, he could not go back empty-handed. The flat refusal chagrined and surprised him. Here even friendship failed! But there was something to be tried yet -- stern resolution, set, fixed determination. He would stay and press his demand until the door was opened, and the request granted. This he proceeded to do, and by dint of importunity secured what ordinary solicitation had failed to obtain.

The success of this man, achieved in the face of a flat denial, was used by the Saviour to illustrate the necessity for insistence in supplicating the throne of heavenly grace. When the answer is not immediately given, the praying Christian must gather courage at each delay, and advance in urgency till the answer comes which is assured,

if he have but the faith to press his petition with vigorous faith.

Laxity, faint-heartedness, impatience, timidity will be fatal to our prayers. Awaiting the onset of our importunity and insistence, is the Father's heart, the Father's hand, the Father's infinite power, the Father's infinite willingness to hear and give to His children.

Importunate praying is the earnest, inward movement of the heart toward God. It is the throwing of the entire force of the spiritual man into the exercise of prayer. Isaiah lamented that no one stirred himself, to take hold of God. Much praying was done in Isaiah's time, but it was too easy, indifferent and complacent. There were no mighty movements of souls toward God. There was no array of sanctified energies bent on reaching and grappling with God, to draw from Him the treasures of His grace. Forceless prayers have no power to overcome difficulties, no power to win marked results, or to gain complete victories. We must win God, ere we can win our plea.

Isaiah looked forward with hopeful eyes to the day when religion would flourish, when there would be times of real praying. When those times came, the watchmen would not abate their vigilance, but cry day and night, and those, who were the Lord's remembrancers, would give Him no rest. Their urgent, persistent efforts would keep all spiritual interests engaged, and make increasing drafts on God's exhaustless treasures.

Importunate praying never faints nor grows weary; it is never discouraged; it never yields to cowardice, but is buoyed up and sustained by a hope that knows no despair, and a faith which will not let go. Importunate praying has patience to wait and strength to continue. It never prepares itself to quit praying, and declines to rise from its knees until an answer is received.

The familiar, yet heartening words of that great missionary, Adoniram Judson, is the testimony of a man who was importunate at prayer. He says:

"I was never deeply interested in any object, never prayed sincerely and earnestly for it, but that it came at some time, no matter how distant the day. Somehow, in some shape, probably the last I would have devised, it came."

"Ask, and ye shall receive. Seek, and ye shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you." These are the ringing challenges of our Lord in regard to prayer, and His intimation that true praying must stay, and advance in effort and urgency, till the prayer is answered, and the blessing sought, received.

In the three words ask, seek, knock, in the order in which He places them, Jesus urges the necessity of importunity in prayer. Asking, seeking, knocking, are ascending rounds in the ladder of successful prayer. No principle is more definitely enforced by Christ than that prevailing prayer must have in it the quality which waits and perseveres, the courage that never surrenders, the patience which never grows tired, the resolution that never wavers.

In the parable preceding that of the Friend at Midnight, a most significant and instructive lesson in this respect is outlined. Indomitable courage, ceaseless pertinacity, fixity of purpose, chief

among the qualities included in Christ's estimate of the highest and most successful form of praying.

Importunity is made up of intensity, perseverance, patience and persistence. The seeming delay in answering prayer is the ground and the demand of importunity. In the first recorded instance of a miracle being wrought upon one who was blind, as given by Matthew, we have an illustration of the way in which our Lord appeared not to hearken at once to those who sought Him. But the two blind men continue their crying, and follow Him with their continual petition, saying, "Thou Son of David, have mercy on us." But He answered them not, and passed into the house. Yet the needy ones followed Him, and, finally, gained their eyesight and their plea.

The case of blind Bartimaeus is a notable one in many ways. Especially is it remarkable for the show of persistence which this blind man exhibited in appealing to our Lord. If it be -- as it seems -- that his first crying was done as Jesus entered into Jericho, and that he continued it until Jesus came out of the place, it is all the stronger an illustration of the necessity of importunate prayer and the success which comes to those who stake their all on Christ, and give Him no peace until He grants them their hearts' desire.

Mark puts the whole incident graphically before us. At first, Jesus seems not to hear. The crowd rebukes the noisy clamour of Bartimaeus. Despite the seeming unconcern of our Lord, however, and despite the rebuke of an impatient and quick-tempered crowd, the blind beggar still cries, and increases the loudness of his cry, until Jesus is impressed and moved. Finally, the crowd, as well as Jesus, hearken to the beggar's plea and declare in favour of his cause. He gains his case. His importunity avails even in the face of apparent neglect on the part of Jesus, and despite opposition and rebuke from the surrounding populace. His persistence won where half-hearted indifference would surely have failed.

Faith has its province, in connection with prayer, and, of course, has its inseparable association with importunity. But the latter quality drives the prayer to the believing point. A persistent spirit brings a man to the place where faith takes hold, claims and appropriates the blessing.

The imperative necessity of importunate prayer is plainly set forth in the Word of God, and needs to be stated and re-stated today. We are apt to overlook this vital truth. Love of ease, spiritual indolence, religious slothfulness, all operate against this type of petitioning. Our praying, however, needs to be pressed and pursued with an energy that never tires, a persistency which will not be denied, and a courage which never fails.

We have need, too, to give thought to that mysterious fact of prayer -- the certainty that there will be delays, denials, and seeming failures, in connection with its exercise. We are to prepare for these, to brook them, and cease not in our urgent praying. Like a brave soldier, who, as the conflict grows sterner, exhibits a superior courage than in the earlier stages of the battle; so does the praying Christian, when delay and denial face him, increase his earnest asking, and ceases not until prayer prevail. Moses furnishes an illustrious example of importunity in prayer. Instead of allowing his nearness to God and his intimacy with Him to dispense with the necessity for importunity, he regards

them as the better fitting him for its exercise. When Israel set up the golden calf, the wrath of God waxed fierce against them, and Jehovah, bent on executing justice, said to Moses when divulging what He purposed doing, "Let Me alone!" But Moses would not let Him alone. He threw himself down before the Lord in an agony of intercession in behalf of the sinning Israelites, and for forty days and nights, fasted and prayed. What a season of importunate prayer was that!

Jehovah was wroth with Aaron, also, who had acted as leader in this idolatrous business of the golden calf. But Moses prayed for Aaron as well as for the Israelites; had he not, both Israel and Aaron had perished, under the consuming fire of God's wrath.

That long season of pleading before God, left its mighty impress on Moses. He had been in close relation with God aforetime, but never did his character attain the greatness that marked it in the days and years following this long season of importunate intercession.

There can be no question but that importunate prayer moves God, and heightens human character! If we were more with God in this great ordinance of intercession, more brightly would our face shine, more richly endowed would life and service be, with the qualities which earn the goodwill of humanity, and bring glory to the Name of God.