

III. PRAYER--THE ALL-IMPORTANT ESSENCE OF EARTHLY WORSHIP

Where the spiritual consciousness is concerned--the department which asks the question and demands the evidence--no evidence is competent or relevant except such as is spiritual. Only that which is above matter and above logic can be heard, because the very question at issue is the existence and personality of a spiritual and supernatural God. Only the Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit. This must be done in a spiritual or supernatural way, or it cannot be done at all.--C.L. Chilton

The Jewish law and the prophets know something of God as a Father. Occasional and imperfect, yet comforting glimpses they had of the great truth of God's Fatherhood, and of our sonship. Christ lays the foundation of prayer deep and strong with this basic principle. The law of prayer, the right to pray, rests on sonship. "Our Father" brings us into the closest relationship to God. Prayer is the child's approach, the child's plea, the child's right. It is the law of prayer that looks up, that lifts up the eye to "Our Father, Who art in Heaven." Our Father's house is our home in Heaven. Heavenly citizenship and heavenly homesickness are in prayer; Prayer is an appeal from the lowness, from the emptiness, from the need of earth, to the highness, the fullness and to the all-sufficiency of Heaven. Prayer turns the eye and the heart heavenward with a child's longings, a child's trust and a child's expectancy. To hallow God's Name, to speak it with bated breath, to hold it sacredly, this also belongs to prayer.

In this connection it might be said that it is requisite to dictate to children the necessity of prayer in order to their salvation. But alas! Unhappily it is thought sufficient to tell them there is a Heaven and a hell; that they must avoid the latter place and seek to reach the former. Yet they are not taught the easiest way to arrive at salvation. The only way to Heaven is by the route of prayer, such prayer of the heart which every one is capable of. It is prayer, not of reasonings which are the fruits of study, or of the exercise of the imagination, which fills the mind with wondering objects, but which fails to settle salvation, but the simple, confidential prayer of the child to his Father in Heaven.

Poverty of spirit enters into true praying. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." "The poor" means paupers, beggars, those who live on the bounties of others, who live by begging. Christ's people live by asking. "Prayer is the Christian's vital breath." It is his affluent inheritance, his daily annuity.

In His own example, Christ illustrates the nature and necessity of prayer. Everywhere He declares that he who is on God's mission in this world will pray. He is an illustrious example of the principle that the more devoted the man is to God, the more prayerful will he be. The diviner the man, the more of the Spirit of the Father and of the Son he has, the more prayerful will he be. And, conversely, it is true that the more prayerful he is, the more of the Spirit of the Father and of the Son will he receive.

The great events and crowning periods of the life of Jesus we find Him in prayer--at the beginning of His ministry, at the fords of the Jordan, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Him; just prior to the transfiguration, and in the garden of Gethsemane. Well do the words of Peter come in here: "Leaving us an example that ye should follow His

steps."

There is an important principle of prayer found in some of the miracles of Christ. It is the progressive nature of the answer to prayer. Not at once does God always give the full answer to prayer, but rather progressively, step by step. Mark 8:22 describes a case which illustrates this important truth, too often overlooked.

"And he cometh to Bethsaida; and they bring a blind man unto him, and besought him to touch him.

"And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town; and when he had spit on his eyes, and put His hands upon him, he asked him if he saw aught.

"And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees, walking.'

"After that he put his hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up; and he was restored, and saw every man clearly."

Alone He has to take us at times, aside from the world, where He can have us all to Himself, and there speak to and deal with us.

We have three cures in blindness in the life of our Lord, which illustrate the nature of God's working in answering prayer, and show the exhaustless variety and the omnipotence of His working.

In the first case Christ came incidentally on a blind man at Jerusalem, made clay, softened it by spittle, and smeared it on the eyes and then commanded the man to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The gracious results lay at the end of his action--washing. The failure to go and wash would have been fatal to the cure. No one, not even the blind man, in this instance, requested the cure.

In the second case the parties who bring the blind man, back their bringing with earnest prayer for cure; they beseech Christ to simply touch him, as though their faith would relieve the burden of a heavy operation. But He took the man by the hand and led him out of the town and apart from the people. Alone, and in secret, this work was to be done. He spat on his eyes and put his hands on them. The response was not complete, a dawning of light, a partial recovery; the first gracious communication but gave him a disordered vision, the second stroke perfected the cure. The man's submissive faith in giving himself up to Christ to be led away into privacy and alone, were prominent features of the cure, as also the gradual reception of sight, and the necessity of a second stroke to finish the perfect work.

The third was the case of blind Bartimæus. It was the urgency of faith declaring itself in clamorous utterances, rebuked by those who were following Christ, but intensified and emboldened by opposition.

The first case comes on Christ unawares; the second was brought with specific intent to Him; the last goes after Christ with irresistible urgency, met by the resistance of the multitude and the seeming indifference of Christ. The cure, though, was without the interposition of any agent, no taking by the hand, no gentle or severe touch, no spittle, nor clay, nor washing--a word only and his sight, full-orbed, came instantly. Each one had experienced the same divine power, the same blessed results, but with marked diversity in the expression of

their faith and the mode of their cure. Suppose, at their meeting, the first had set up the particulars and process of his cure, the spittle, the clay, the washing in Siloam as the only Divine process, as the only genuine credentials of a Divine work, how far from the truth, how narrow and misleading such a standard of decision! Not methods, but results, are the tests of the Divine work.

Each one could say: "This one thing I know, whereas I was blind I now see." The results were conscious results; that Christ did the work they knew; faith was the instrument, but its exercise different; the method of Christ's working different; the various steps that brought them to the gracious end on their part and on His part at many points strikingly dissimilar.

What are the limitations of prayer? How far do its benefits and possibilities reach? What part of God's dealing with man, and with man's world, is unaffected by prayer? Do the possibilities of prayer cover all temporal and spiritual good? The answers to these questions are of transcendental importance. The answer will gauge the effort and results of our praying. The answer will greatly enhance the value of prayer, or will greatly depress prayer. The answer to these important questions are fully covered by Paul's words on prayer: "Be careful for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil. 4:6).