

VIII. PRAYERLESSNESS IN THE PULPIT

"Henry Martyn laments that want of private devotional reading and shortness of prayer through incessant sermon-making had produced much strangeness between God and his soul.' He judges that he had dedicated too much time to public ministrations and too little to private communion with God. He was much impressed with the need of setting apart times for fasting and to devote times to for solemn prayer. Resulting from this he records Was assisted this morning to pray for two hours.'"--E. M. B.

All God's saints came to their sainthood by the way of prayer. The saints could do nothing without prayer. We can go further and say that the angels in heaven can do nothing without prayer, but can do all things by praying. These messengers of the Highest are largely dependent on the prayers of the saints for the sphere and power of their usefulness, which open avenues for angelic usefulness and create missions for them on the earth. And as it is with all the Apostles, saints and angels in heaven, so is it of preachers. "The angels of the churches" can do nothing without prayer which opens doors of usefulness and gives power and point to their words.

How can a preacher preach effectively, make impressions on hearts and minds, and have fruits to his ministry, who does not get his message first-hand from God? How can he deliver a rightful message without having his faith quickened, his vision cleared, and his heart warmed by his closeting with God?

It would be well for all of us, in this connection, to read again Isaiah's vision recorded in the seventh chapter of his prophecy when, as he waited, and confessed and prayed before the throne, the angel touched his lips with a live coal from God's altar:

"Then flew one of the seraphim unto me," he says, "having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar; and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips, and thy iniquity is taken away and thy sin is purged."

Oh, the need there is for present-day preachers to have their lips touched with a live coal from the altar of God! This fire is brought to the mouths of those prophets who are of a prayerful spirit, and who wait in the secret place for the appointed angel to bring the living flame. Preachers of the same temper as Isaiah received visits from the angel who brings live coals to touch their lips. Prayer always brings the living flame to unloose tongues, to open doors of utterance, and to open great and effectual doors of doing good. This, above all else, is the great need of the prophets of God.

As far as the abiding interests of religion are concerned, a pulpit without a closet will always be a barren thing. Blessed is the preacher whose pulpit and closet are hard by each other, and who goes from the one into the other. To consecrate no place to prayer, is to make a beggarly showing, not only in praying, but in holy living, for secret prayer and holy living are so closely joined that they can never be dissevered. A preacher or a Christian may live a decent, religious life, without secret prayer, but decency and holiness are two widely different things. And the former is attained only by secret prayer.

A preacher may preach in an official, entertaining and learned way,

without prayer, but between this kind of preaching and the sowing of God's precious seed there is distance not easily covered.

We cannot declare too often or too strongly that prayer, involving all of its elements, is the one prime condition of the success of Christ's kingdom, and that all else is secondary and incidental. Prayerful preachers, prayerful men and prayerful women only can press this Gospel with aggressive power. They only can put in it conquering forces. Preachers may be sent out by the thousand, their equipments be ever so complete, but unless they be men skilled in the trade of prayer, trained to its martial and exhaustive exercise, their going will be lacking in power and effectiveness. Moreover, except the men and women who are behind these preachers, who furnish their equipment, are men and women in whose characters prayer has become to be serious labour, their outlay will be a vain and bootless effort.

Prayer should be the inseparable accompaniment of all missionary effort, and must be the one equipment of the missionaries as they go out to their fields of labour, and enter upon their delicate and responsible tasks. Prayer and missions go hand in hand. A prayerless missionary is a failure before he goes out, while he is out, and when he returns to his native land. A prayerless board of missions, too, needs to learn the lesson of the necessity of prayer.

Prayer enthrones God as sovereign and elevates Jesus Christ to sit with Him, and had Christian preachers used to its full the power of prayer, long ere this the "kingdoms of this world would have become the kingdom of God and of his Christ." Added to all the missionary addresses, the money raised for missions, to the scores being sent out to needy fields, is prayer. Missions have their root in prayer, must have prayer in all of its plans, and prayer must precede, go with and follow all of its missionaries and labourers.

In the face of all difficulties which face the Church in its great work on earth, and the almost superhuman and complex obstacles in the way of evangelizing the world, God encourages us by His strongest promises: "Call unto me and I will answer thee, and show great and mighty things which thou knowest not." The revelations of God to him who is of a prayerful spirit go far beyond the limits of the praying. God commits Himself to answer the specific prayer, but He does not stop there. He says, "Ask of me things to come concerning my sons, and concerning the work of my hands, command ye me." Think over that remarkable engagement of God to those who pray, "Command ye me," He actually places Himself at the command of praying preachers and a praying Church. And this is a sufficient answer to all doubts, fears and unbelief, and a wonderful inspiration to do God's work in His own way, which means by the way of prayer.

And as if to still fortify the faith of His ministry and of His Church, to hedge about and fortify against any temptation to doubt or discouragement, He declares by the mouth of the great Apostle to the Gentiles, "He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that ye can ask or think."

It is unquestionably taught that preachers in going forward with their God-appointed tasks, in their prayers, can command God, which is to command His ability, His presence and His power. "Certainly I will be with thee," is the reply to every sincere inquiring minister of God. All of God's called men in the ministry are privileged to stretch their

prayers into regions where neither words nor thought can go, and are permitted to expect from Him beyond their praying, and for their praying, God Himself, and then in addition, "great and mighty things which thou knowest not."

Real heart-praying, live-praying, praying by the power of the Spirit, direct, specific, ardent, simple praying--this is the kind of praying which legitimately belongs to the pulpit. This is the kind demanded just now by the men who stand in the pulpit. There is no school in which to learn to pray in public but in the closet. Preachers who have learned to pray in the closet, have mastered the secret of pulpit praying. It is but a short step from secret praying to effectual, live, pulpit praying. Good pulpit praying follows from good secret praying. A closed closet with the preacher makes for cold, spiritless, formal praying in the pulpit. Study how to pray, O preacher, but not by studying the forms of prayer, but by attending the school of prayer on your knees before God. Here is where we learn not only to pray before God, but learn also how to pray in the presence of men. He who has learned the way to the closet has discovered the way to pray when he enters the pulpit.

How easily we become professional and mechanical in the most sacred undertakings! Henry Martyn learned the lesson so hard to learn, that the cultivation and perfection of personal righteousness was the great and prime factor in the preacher's true success. So likewise he that learns the lesson so hard to learn, that live, spiritual, effective pulpit praying is the outgrowth of regular secret praying, has learned his lesson well. More-over: his work, as a preacher, will depend upon his praying.

The great need of the hour is for good pray-ers in the pulpit as well as good preachers. Just as live, spiritual preaching is the kind which impresses and moves men, so the same kind of pulpit praying moves and impresses God. Not only is the preacher called to preach well, but also he must be called to pray well. Not that he is called to pray after the fashion of the Pharisees, who love to stand in public and pray that they may be seen and heard of men. The right sort of pulpit praying is far removed from Pharisaical praying, as far distant as light is from darkness, as great as heat is from cold, as life is from death.

Where are we? What are we doing? Preaching is the very loftiest work possible for a man to do. And praying goes hand-in-hand with preaching. It is a mighty, a lofty work. Preaching is a life-giving work sowing the seeds of eternal life. Oh, may we do it well, do it after God's order, do it successfully! May we do it divinely well, so that when the end comes, the solemn close of earthly probation, we may hear from the Great Judge of all the earth, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

When we consider this great question of preaching, we are led to exclaim, "With what reverence, simplicity and sincerity ought it to be done!" What truth in the inward parts is demanded in order that it be done acceptably to God and with profit to men! How real, true and loyal those who practise it ought to be! How great the need to pray as Christ prayed, with strong cryings, and tears, with godly fear! Oh, may we as preachers do the real thing of preaching, with no sham, with no mere form of words, with no dull, cold, professional utterances, but give ourselves to prayerful preaching and prayerful praying! Preaching which gives life is born of praying which gives life. Preaching and praying

always go together, like Siamese twins, and can never be separated without death to one or the other, or death to both.

This is not the time for kid-glove methods nor sugar-coated preaching. This is no time for playing the gentleman as a preacher nor for putting on the garb of the scholar in the pulpit, if we propose to disciple all nations, destroy idolatry, crush the rugged and defiant forces of Mohammedanism, and overcome and destroy the tremendous forces of evil now opposing the kingdom of God in this world. Brave men, true men, praying men--afraid of nothing but God, are the kind needed just now. There will be no smiting the forces of evil which now hold the world in thralldom, no lifting of the degraded hordes of paganism, to light and eternal life, by any but praying men. All others are merely playing at religion, make-believe soldiers, with no armour and no ammunition, who are absolutely helpless in the face of a wicked and gainsaying world. None but soldiers and bond servants of Jesus Christ can possibly do this tremendous work. "Endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ," cries the great Apostle. This is no time to think of self, to consult with dignity, to confer with flesh and blood, to think of ease, or to shrink from hardship, grief and loss. This is the time for toil, suffering, and self-denial. We must lose all for Christ in order to gain all for Christ. Men are needed in the pulpit, as well as in the pew, who are "bold to take up, firm to sustain, the consecrated cross." Here is the sort of preachers God wants. And this sort are born of much praying. For no man is sufficient for these things who is a prayerless preacher. Praying preachers alone can meet the demand and will be equal to the emergency.

The Gospel of Jesus has neither relish nor life in it when spoken by prayerless lips or handled by prayerless hands. Without prayer the doctrines of Christ degenerate into dead orthodoxy. Preaching them without the aid of the Spirit of God, who comes into the preacher's messages only by prayer, is nothing more than mere lecturing, with no life, no grip, no force in the preaching. It amounts to nothing more than live rationalism or sickly sentimentalism. "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word," was the settled and declared purpose of the apostolic ministry. The kingdom of God waits on prayer, and prayer puts wings on the Gospel and power into it. By prayer it moves forward with conquering force and rapid advance.

If prayer be left out of account, the preacher rises to no higher level than the lecturer, the politician or the secular teacher. That which distinguishes him from all other public speakers is the fact of prayer. And as prayer deals with God, this means that the preacher has God with him, while other speakers do not need God with them to make their public messages effective. The preacher above everything else is a spiritual man, a man of the Spirit, who deals with spiritual things. And this implies that he has to do with God in His pulpit work in a high and holy sense. This can be said of no other public speaker. And so prayer must necessarily go with the preacher and his preaching. Pure intellectuality is the only qualification for other public speakers. Spirituality which is born of prayer belongs to the preacher.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus Christ often speaks of prayer. It stands out prominently in His utterances on that occasion. The lesson of prayer which He taught was one of hallowing God's name, of pushing God's kingdom. We are to long for the coming of the kingdom of God. It is to be longed for, and must be first in our intercourse with God.

God's will must have its royal way in the hearts and wills of those who pray. The point of urgency is made by our Lord that men are to pray in earnest, by asking, seeking, knocking, in order to hallow God's name, bring His will to pass, and to forward His kingdom among men.

And let it be kept in mind that while this prayer-lesson has to do with all men, it has a peculiar application to the ministry, for it was the twelve would-be preachers who made the request of our Lord Jesus Christ, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples." So that primarily these words were spoken first to twelve men just entering upon their work as ministers. Jesus was talking as Luke records it, to preachers. So He speaks to the preachers of this day. How He pressed these twelve men into the ministry of prayer! The present-day ministry needs the same lesson to be taught them, and needs the same urgency pressing them to prayer as their habit of life.

Notwithstanding all he may claim for himself, nor how many good things may be put down to his credit, a prayerless preacher will never learn well God's truth, which He is called upon to declare with all fidelity and plainness of speech. Blind and blinding still will he be if he lives a prayerless life. A prayerless ministry cannot know God's truth, and not knowing it, cannot teach it to ignorant men. He who teaches us the path of prayer, must first of all walk in the same path. A preacher cannot teach what he does not know. A blind leader of the blind will be the preacher who is a stranger to prayer. Prayer opens the preacher's eyes, and keeps them open to the evil of sin, the peril of it, and the penalty it incurs. A blind leader leading the blind will be the vocation of him who is prayerless in his own life.

The best and the greatest offering which the Church and the ministry can make to God is an offering of prayer. If the preachers of the twentieth century will learn well the lesson of prayer, and use it fully in all its exhaustless efficiency, the millennium will come to its noon ere the century closes.

The Bible preacher prays. He is filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with God's Word, and is filled with faith. He has faith in God, faith in God's only begotten Son, his personal Saviour, and he has implicit faith in God's Word. He cannot do otherwise than pray. He cannot be other than a man of prayer. The breadth of his life and the pulsations of his heart are prayer. The Bible preacher lives by prayer, loves by prayer, and preaches by prayer. His bended knees in the place of secret prayer advertise what kind of preacher he is.

Preachers may lose faith in God, in Jesus Christ as their personal and present Saviour, become devoid of the peace of God and let the joy of salvation go out of their hearts, and yet be unconscious of it. How needful for the preacher to be continually examining himself, and inquiring into his personal relations to God and into his religious state! The preachers, like the philosophers of old, may defer to a system; and earnestly contend for it after they have lost all faith in its great facts. Men may in the pulpit with hearts of unbelief, minister at the altars of the Church, while alien to the most sacred and vital principles of the Gospel.

It is a comparatively easy task for preachers to become so absorbed in the material and external affairs of the Church as to lose sight of their own souls, forget the necessity of prayer so needful to keep their own souls alive to God, and lose the inward sweetness of a

Christian experience.

The prayer which makes much of our preaching must itself be made much of. The character of our praying will determine the character of our preaching. Serious praying will give serious weight to preaching. Prayer makes preaching strong, gives it unction and makes it stick. In every ministry, weighty for good, prayer has always been a serious business prophetic of good.

It cannot be said with too much emphasis, the preacher must be preeminently a man of prayer.

He must learn to pray, and he must have such an estimate of prayer and its great worth that he feels he cannot afford to omit it from the catalogue of his private duties. His heart must be attuned to prayer, while he himself touches the highest note of prayer. In the school of prayer only can the heart learn to preach. No gifts, no learning, no brain-force, can atone for the failure to pray. No earnestness, no diligence, no study, no amount of social service, will supply its lack. Talking to men for God may be a great thing, and may be very commendable. But talking to God for men, is far more valuable and commendable.

The power of Bible preaching lies not simply or solely in superlative devotion to God's Word, and jealous passion for God's truth. All these are essential, valuable, helpful. But above all these things, there must be the sense of the divine presence, and the consciousness of the divine power of God's Spirit on the preacher and in him. He must have an anointing, an empowering, a sealing of the Holy Spirit, for the great work of preaching, making him akin to God's voice, and giving him the energy of God's right hand, so that this Bible preacher can say, "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart. For I am called by thy name, O Lord of hosts."