

WHAT IS PRAYER?

I Timothy 2:1-8

The earliest mention of prayer in the Bible is in Genesis 4:26 which states, "Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord." No one can read the Word of God without being impressed with the large place given to prayer in its pages, because it is mentioned hundreds of times.

From time immemorial men have prayed. They have prayed in the privacy of the closet and in public places under all sorts of circumstances. They have prayed for various and numerous things. Hezekiah prayed for his life to be lengthened. Hannah prayed for a son. Elijah prayed for rain. David prayed for mercy. Daniel prayed for help. Paul prayed for grace. Men have prayed in the morning, at noon and at night. They have prayed in childhood, in youth, in manhood or womanhood, and in old age.

Prayer is one of the most profoundly important subjects which have to do with the Christian life. A Christian life begins with prayer, is made strong by prayer, and is consummated by prayer. The first sign of the life of faith is prayer. All spiritual progress and all success in Christian service are conditioned on the prayer habit. Those who have made the greatest impact for good on the world and left the best influence behind them have been men and women of prayer. If we are to please God and to influence people properly, we must understand the meaning of prayer and learn to pray.

Perhaps much of our ineffectiveness in prayer is due to our failure to think on the question, "What is prayer?" What do we mean by prayer?

I. Definitions of Prayer.

It is not a mere attempt to be evasive when one speaks of prayer as an indefinable reality. Even those who know the most about electricity readily admit that they know very little about what it is. So it is with prayer. As in the case of electricity, we understand prayer best by perceiving what it does.

What is prayer? These answers have been recorded:

"Prayer is the expression of an instinct as deep and as endless as life."

"Prayer is the deepest impulse of the human soul."

"Prayer is the reaching out of the heart of man toward the heart of God."

"Prayer is an avowal of our creature dependence."

"Prayer is weakness leaning on Omnipotence."

"Prayer is faith laying hold on God's promises."

"Prayer is worship, addressed to the Father, in the name of Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit."

"Prayer is a sincere, sensible pouring out of the soul to God, through Christ, and in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God has promised." -- John Bunyan.

"Prayer is an offering up of our desires to God for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgment of His mercies." -- Westminster Shorter Catechism.

"Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed."

"Prayer is the converse of the soul with God." -- Charles Hodge.

"Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance; prayer is laying hold on God's highest willingness." -- Archbishop Trench.

All of these definitions have been beneficial to me, and I am grateful for them. It has been helpful to me also to think of prayer as being:

1. Communion with God.

Prayer is the communion of the soul with God; that is, the conscious outgoing of the soul in spiritual fellowship with God. In prayer we not only commune with God, but He also communes with us. We talk with God and not just to Him. Communion is both an imparting and a receiving experience. We get to know people better by talking with them. We also get to know God better by talking with Him in prayer. If we are to commune with Him, we must not talk all of the time when we are praying. We must be silent and listen to Him. He said, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). We are certainly the losers because we do not spend more time in stillness before God, so that He can speak to us as well as we to Him. This is one of the very best means whereby we may assimilate His grace and grow to spiritual maturity. Prayer is a conversant communion in which God hears many things from us and has much to say to us which we need to hear and learn.

Instead of asking God for some gift or blessing, just be still before Him and say, "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant is listening." Have you ever tried that? If not, enter this marvelous experience before the coming of another day.

"In the secret of His presence
how my soul delights to hide!
O, how precious are the lessons
which I learn at Jesus' side.
Earthly cares can never vex me,
neither trials lay me low;
For when Satan comes to tempt me,
to the secret place I go;
To the secret place I go.

"Would you like to know the secret
of the presence of the Lord?
Go and hide beneath His shadow,
this shall then be your reward.
And when'er you learn the secret
of that happy hiding place
You will surely bear the image
of the Master in your face --
Of the Master in your face."

The president of one of the largest banks in New York City related an interesting story of an event that took place in the bank over which he now presides. When he was young he served for a number of years as an office boy in that bank. One day the president called him into his office and said, "I want you to come into my office and be with me." The young man replied, "But what do you want me to do?" "Never mind that," said the president, "You will learn about that soon. I just want you to be in here with me." "That

was the most remarkable moment in my life," said the great banker. "Being with that man made me all I am today." In a somewhat similar sense that is what God wants, that we shall be with Him, catch His spirit and transmit it to others.

2. Committal to God.

Prayer is a cheerful committal of self and substance to the doing of God's will in one's life. When we truly commit our difficulties, problems, trials and needs to God, He gladly gives us relief or release.

3. Cooperation with God.

Prayer so relates our lives to God that He can function through our thoughts, emotions, volitions and activities. It simply opens the way through which He can do for us, in us and through us that which He wills to do.

II. Elements of Prayer.

A careful examination of the prayers in the Bible will reveal the fact that certain elements should characterize all true prayer. We shall consider seven of these elements.

1. Adoration.

Adoration is the recognition of and devout meditation on the worthiness of God. In adoration one lets his mind dwell on what God is in Himself. It is the homage of a creature to his Creator. In it one's mind is not occupied with God's gifts, but with God Himself. Adoration is revealed in the words of the Model Prayer in Matthew 6:9, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name." Another illustration is given in the words of the old hymn:

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and Mighty!
God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity!"

A realization and recognition of the goodness, greatness and glory of God result in humility, reverence and awe. Transcending admiration and wonder, adoration is a blending of love with the fervent desire that all the world should know the Lord and glorify Him. Its language is, "Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless His holy name" (Psalm 103:1).

2. Praise.

By this I mean reverentially ascribing to God the glory which is due Him for the infinite perfection which He possesses, and for all of the wonderful manifestations which He has made of Himself in His Word and in His works. Since the chief end of man is to glorify God, it is certainly proper for us to ascribe praise to Him when we pray.

3. Confession.

Confession is the opening of the soul to God and acknowledging its consciousness of sin. Confession is of two kinds -- general and particular. General confession is the type that is used most frequently in public prayer. It is an acknowledgment that we are unworthy in the sight of God. It is an admission that we have failed to do some things which we should have done, and that we have done some things which we should not have done. Particular confession is used more frequently in private praying. It is right to make a full and complete confession of sin of every kind to God in order to be forgiven, cleansed and restored to the proper relationship with Him. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9). A realization of sin is a prerequisite to confession, confession to forgiveness, and forgiveness to both happiness and usefulness.

How reluctant we are to confess our sins to God! We have the tendency to minimize them. Instead of calling them what they are, we refer to our sins as mistakes, errors and shortcomings. It is difficult to come right out and say, "I have sinned," but it is necessary before there can be a restoration of fellowship with God.

4. Thanksgiving.

In thanksgiving the thoughts are turned to what God has done for us and for others, and the lips express appreciation for all the gifts received from Him. Thanksgiving is that element of prayer which makes grateful recognition of the fact that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17).

In approaching God to ask for new blessings, we should never fail to thank Him for blessings already received. We should be just as definite in returning thanks as we are in asking for certain gifts. God is grieved deeply by the ingratitude of which so many of us are guilty. "Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving" (Psalm 95:2). "Enter into his courts with praise; give thanks unto him, and bless his name" (Psalm 100:4). "With thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Philippians 4:6).

5. Petition.

Both in the teaching of Christ and elsewhere in the Scriptures we are encouraged to make definite requests for specific objects. Our Lord said, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matthew 7:7). For some people petition, or asking for something, seems to be about the only element there is in their prayers. Our petitions should be confined to the things which are in accordance with His will.

6. Dedication.

Prayer is far more than merely asking God for something. In real prayer God's children put themselves at God's disposal to do what

He wills for them, in them, with them and through them. In carrying out His purposes in the world, God wants to take us into fellowship with Him and to work through us. The primary thing in prayer is God's will and not ours. His will is always far better than ours.

7. Intercession.

Intercession is the act of conferring with God in behalf of another or others. This unselfish aspect of prayer enables one to lose sight of self. Many have been saved, healed, blessed and made a blessing because godly men and women have interceded in their behalf. When we pray for others, influences are brought to bear upon them that would not be if we did not intercede for them. There are many places to which we can never go, but we can reach them with our prayers, and God will send His blessings there because we have prayed. Intercessory prayer is a privilege. It is also the duty of every child of God. To neglect it is to sin. Samuel said, "Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you" (I Samuel 12:23). Intercession is the very zenith of prayer. In intercessory prayer lies our highest spiritual development, our sweetest fellowship with the Lord, and our greatest contribution to society.

When everything else fails, real prayer to God brings success. In the great South African mines it was noticed that the natives discovered more jewels than the white men. When asked the reason for this, a Kaffir replied unhesitatingly, "We black men get down on our knees." It is true, not only in the search for diamonds, but also in the search for the treasures of life, that the one who gets down on his knees and prays always discovers more jewels than those who fail to pray. Prayer makes a tremendous difference. Therefore, learn to pray.