

"OUR FATHER"

"After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name." Matthew 6:9.

This is one of our Lord's choicest lessons in the high art of prayer. However, it was not His first lesson. He taught His disciples their first lesson in prayer by His own example. That which first awakened in their hearts a desire to pray was not what Christ said about prayer, but what He did about it. That is always the most effective and convincing method of teaching.

It was through His own prayer-life that Christ brought His disciples to the realization of their past failures in prayer. As they watched Him pray, it came home to them how pitifully inadequate their own praying had been. But, His example did far more for them than that. As they saw Him at prayer, they not only became convinced of their own past failures, but also of their amazing possibilities. So they came to Christ wistfully and hopefully with this wise request, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Here we are brought face to face with one of the most vital subjects in connection with the Christian life. Prayer is the highest activity of the human soul. Man is at his greatest and highest when he comes face to face with God in prayer. He is at his very acme when he is speaking to God. Not only is prayer the highest activity of the soul, but it is the ultimate test of the actual spiritual condition. There is nothing that tells the truth about our spirituality so much as our prayer life. The outstanding characteristic of all the most saintly people the world has ever known has been that they have not only spent much time in private prayer, but that they have delighted in doing so. The more saintly the person the more time he has spent in conversation with God.

There is no question but that our greatest need as Christians is to be able to pray more like our Saviour prayed. Certainly one of the greatest weaknesses of Christians today is the paltriness of their prayer-life. What is the reason? Practical James said, "Ye have not, because ye ask not" (James 4:2). Prayerless Christians are powerless. Failure to pray is a 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). We frequently miss the greatest blessings in the Christian life because we do not know how to pray aright. We need instruction as to how and for what to pray. [Because it covers these two things in a wonderful manner, I plan to spend some time in a consideration of what is generally called "The Lord's Prayer."]

There is nothing more exalted and elevating than this wonderful prayer which was taught by the Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples who came to Him with this request, "Lord, teach us to pray." Our Lord found it necessary to warn His followers against certain dangers in connection with prayer, as well as to give them positive instruction. You will recall that He had already warned them not to be as the hypocrites, not to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets in order to be seen of men, not to believe that vain repetitions in and of themselves have any value, and not to think that prayer had no special value or benefit. He also told them that they must pray in secret. He taught them to shut out other people, to shut in themselves with God, and to concentrate upon Him and their relationship to Him. Then He went on to say: "After this manner therefore pray ye," as He gave them instruction with regard to the method of prayer. The way in which Christ introduced this prayer indicated that it is a pattern or model for all of His followers through all the centuries.

So ignorant are we that "we know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26). Our Lord has graciously furnished the instruction which we so sorely need, revealing the manner in which we should approach God, the order in which our requests should be presented, the things for which we most need to ask, and the adoration which is due to the One Whom we are supplicating. Here we are taught the manner and method of prayer, as well as the matter for which to pray.

The experience of many of us is somewhat like that of the man who was sick of the palsy. He and his four friends believed in the power, goodness and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ, but their problem was how to gain access to Him. Is that not true of us today? How hard it seems to be to get right through into the very presence of God when we pray! How difficult it is to force our way through so many distracting thoughts, worldly cares and sinful desires! Being human, all of us are pressed by the urgency of our position, cares, anxieties, troubles and anguish of mind.

This model prayer is so simple that a little child can understand it, and, yet, it is so profound that its depths are unfathomable though a scholar spend a lifetime in the study of it. The first lesson that Christ teaches us in this remarkable prayer is that of a right conception of the One to Whom we pray. The importance of this is evident at once. Our conception of the One to Whom we pray will surely determine both the nature and the expectancy of our prayers.

How, then, are we to think of God? We are to think of Him as our Lord Jesus thought of Him. Jesus Christ called Him "Father." That was how Christ spoke to Him throughout His entire earthly life. This title teaches us to whom we must pray, namely, to God alone. In spite of the fact that many regard God as a principle, He is a Person, and we must regard Him as such always.

"Our Father which art in heaven" is an expression which presents to us the One to Whom we are to pray. This title proves that God is not a cosmic principle, but a living Person. It connotes authority, power, wisdom, goodness, love and mercy. By this title light is thrown upon the inmost nature of God. Who gave God this name? Who threw this light upon the divine nature? Only the Son of God could have done so. Knowledge of God the Father is gained through the Incarnate Son. By calling God, "Father," the Lord Jesus Christ brought sunshine into the souls and hope into the lives of people. He thus revealed the fact that God is more than wisdom, more than power and more than justice. Above and beyond everything else, "God is love" (I John 4:8).

The key to the understanding of successful prayer is the right approach. The essence of true prayer is found in the words "Our Father." That glorious word "Father," which Christ placed at the beginning of the model prayer, stands alone in all its royal simplicity. Our heavenly Father is perfect in His knowledge of us. He knows exactly what we need before we ask Him. Because He always knows what is best for us, He sometimes has to refuse our foolish and selfish requests. Because He is perfect in His love, God is eager to answer our prayers when we ask for the things which are in accordance with His blessed will. It is to this Divine Person, the One Who has our best interests at heart, that we are invited to draw nigh. Since He is our heavenly Father, we are assured of His love and power.

This word "Father" suggests to us the spirit in which our prayers must be offered. We must pray in the spirit of filial trust and childlike confidence. This title is used here to teach us confidence, trust, faith and holy boldness. It is intended to inspire us with that perfect love which casteth out all fear.

Wherein lies the blessedness of having God for our Father? He will provide for us. An earthly parent provides for his child. Children rely upon their parents for the supply of their needs. Since we have trusted the Lord for our salvation, can't we trust Him for a livelihood? He feeds the fowls of the air. Certainly, then, He will feed and clothe the children of His grace. "No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Psalm 84:11). Moreover, God will protect us from danger. An earthly parent is the protector of his child. He does not hesitate to employ all his strength and resources, if need be, to protect the loved one from harm. So the eye of God is always upon His child. His omniscience keeps watch, His omnipotence shelters, and His providence directs. He will stand between us and danger.

Education is another blessing included in the Fatherhood of God. No wise father neglects the drawing forth or educing of the physical, mental and spiritual faculties of his child. So our heavenly Father trains His children for His service here and His glory hereafter. Another thing which any wise parent will not neglect is the discipline of his child. Greater injury cannot be done to a child than to spare reproof and correction when needed. Of course, it is painful to the parent, but it would be unkind clemency and pernicious selfishness to withhold it. A child who does not receive discipline will grow up to be a misery to himself and a plague to others. If God is our Father, let us submit to His will. If He lays His strokes on us, they are the corrections of a Father and not the punishments of a judge.

How grateful we should be for the privilege of fellowship with the heavenly Father! An earthly father does not treat his children as strangers or visitors, but is on terms of loving familiarity with them. To our heavenly Father, we may bring our greatest necessities and bitterest griefs. As children to an earthly parent, we may pour out to God all our cares, heartaches, problems, fears and hopes, knowing full well that He delights to listen.

God is the one perfect Father. He is perfect in love and in wisdom. Earthly fathers are subject to infirmities, but the heavenly Father is perfect. "Your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Earthly parents are not always wise, but God is all-wise. In perfect love and wisdom He is working for our very best interests. Human love can do much, but there are times when it is helpless. God is ever perfect in helpfulness. He is far more anxious to bless His children than any earthly parent is to grant the request of his child.

Unfortunately there are many people to whom the idea of fatherhood is not one of love. Many a little boy is the son of a father who is a drunkard and a wife-beater, and who is nothing but a cruel beast. That little boy knows nothing in life but cursings and beatings for no justifiable reason whatever. That is his only idea of fatherhood. If you tell him that God is a Father, and leave it at that, it is not very helpful. The poor boy has a wrong idea of fatherhood. His notion of a father is that of a man who behaves like his own parent.

It is a great privilege to be a child of God. This relationship ought to make a fretful and feverish attitude toward life impossible. It should enable us to face whatever comes of joy or sorrow with quiet hearts and steady eyes.

When we take the position of children, there is something more involved than privilege. There is also obligation. "Our" is the pronoun of partnership. The title, "Our Father," teaches us to recognize the Christian brotherhood and to pray not for ourselves only, but for the whole family. Many believe in the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man, but these doctrines are not taught in the Bible. It is only those who are in Christ who are truly the children of God. We express our love for the brethren by praying for them. We should be much concerned about their needs, as well as our own.

These words, "which art in heaven," remind us of God's greatness, majesty and infinite elevation above us. Just as the words "our Father" inspire confidence and love, the words "which art in heaven" should fill us with humility and awe. Heaven is a high and exalted place, and we should realize that, when we pray, we are approaching One Who is infinitely above us.