

The Place of Prayer in the Minister's Life.*

FIRST, let us remind ourselves of that which I think we all know, and yet which I fear in actual life we are too apt to forget, the tremendous importance and necessity of prayer.

Prayer is to the soul what breath is to the body ; it is the sign of life, as in the case of St. Paul it was said of him, " Behold he prayeth." Of course there may be, and often is, the form of prayer, but real, true, believing prayer comes from the soul that realises its acceptance with Christ, and feels its need of Him. How many, how great, how varied are our needs, needs which only God Himself can supply ; and how frequently are we reminded in God's Word that we are to ask and that if we ask aright and in faith, we have the things that we ask, " Whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." " Ye have not, because ye ask not." " Ask and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you." Prayer is necessary, not only because of our many and varied needs, and because that is God's appointed way by which those needs are to be met ; but the soul that has found Christ through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, delights, or should delight, to hold intercourse and communion with Him, as is so beautifully expressed in the words of a well known hymn.

In the secret of His presence how my soul delights to hide,
Oh how precious are the lessons 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.

Or again in the words of Montgomery's hymn—

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire
Uttered or unexpressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear ;
The upward glancing of an eye,
When none but God is near.

Prayer is the simplest form of speech
That infant lips can try ;
Prayer the sublimest strains that reach
The Majesty on high.

Prayer is giving glory to all God's attributes of wisdom, love

* A Paper read at the Matlock Bath Clerical Meeting, September 24.

and truth. His omnipotence and omnipresence, His interest in man's welfare, our dependence on Him, and His fulness and all-sufficiency, are manifested in the believing prayer of His people. Prayer is the noblest act of faith for a poor sinner. It is coming to the holy God, reposing upon His infinite love as revealed in His Word, delighting and rejoicing in Him, notwithstanding all our sins, through the new and living way Christ Jesus, and by the gift of His Spirit. Prayer is also our being made like Christ, intercessors for a perishing world, and the Lord's instruments for communicating the largest blessings to our fellow men, and hastening the coming of His Kingdom.

Prayer is a natural and reasonable act for human beings. The first feeling of the mind, and the natural expression of that feeling in any sudden and alarming emergency and distress, is an act of prayer to God. The relations by which God has revealed Himself show us this duty. He is a Father and gives us the spirit of adoption, to cry, Abba, Father. Children should go to their father to ask of him a supply of their wants, and to tell Him all that they feel and enjoy. Prayer is an indispensable means to be used in order to obtain spiritual blessings. The good things of this life are given indeed indiscriminately to good or bad men, God thus showing how little value we ought to set on those things which the wicked often abundantly possess. But grace and pardon, mercy and salvation, are promised expressly to those who pray. "If thou shalt pray unto God, He shall be favourable unto thee." "Thou Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon Thee." No excellences can compensate for the want of prayer. In fact, it lies at the root of the real benefit of all the other gifts of God to man. But religion is in a low state in the heart of that man on whom prayer must be urged as a duty. It ought ever to be considered as the greatest of all mercies that we are permitted to pray to God, and assured that every one that asketh receiveth. We should consider prayer as a privilege rather than a duty.

In the next place let us consider the importance of the minister's office; it is true we are not sacrificing priests, we are not to come between the sinner and the Saviour. I trust none of us gathered here have any thought or desire of usurping that glorious position which belongs to Christ alone, our High Priest. We have no sacri-

fice to offer, except it be the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and that every believer can offer. "For by *one* offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." "So Christ was *once* offered to bear the sins of many." Or, in the words of our Communion Office, "Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Who of Thy tender mercy didst give Thine only Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; Who made there, by His *one* oblation of Himself *once* offered, a full, perfect and *sufficient* sacrifice," etc., for the sins of the whole world. While it is true, and we need to emphasise it, that we are not sacrificing priests, yet, on the other hand, ours is a high and holy calling, and we may rightly say with St. Paul, "I magnify mine office." Humble in ourselves, remembering our own frailty and weakness, not puffed up, not lording it over God's heritage; but at the same time remembering that we were called to our holy office by the Holy Ghost, that we have been set apart to be God's ministering servants, that while we do not or ought not to dare to come between the sinner and the Saviour, yet it is especially our privilege by the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead souls to Jesus, to proclaim the everlasting Gospel, to minister to the sick and dying. What glorious opportunities of usefulness and service are ours! Perhaps there is nothing sadder and more awful than an unfaithful and an unconverted minister. What incalculable harms such a one may do, what a stumbling block and hindrance he may be! I think it was Dean Pigou who once said, "The weakness of the Church of England is her unconverted clergy." Brethren, I speak with feeling on this point, because by the grace and mercy of God for five years I was kept out of the ministry until I was converted. Ours is a high and holy calling, and we do well to constantly remind ourselves of it, our privileges, our opportunities, our responsibilities. It lies in our power, if we are wholly yielded to the Lord, and filled with His Spirit, to be the channel of wonderful blessing to many around us. Let us remind ourselves of the words spoken to us when we were ordained presbyters: "Seeing that ye cannot by any other means compass the doing of so weighty a work, pertaining to the salvation of man, but with doctrine and exhortation taken out of the Holy Scriptures, and with a life agreeable to the same; consider how studious ye ought to be in reading and learning the Scriptures. We have good hope that you will continually *pray* to God the Father, by the mediation of our only

Saviour Jesus Christ, for the heavenly assistance of the Holy Ghost ; that by daily reading and weighing of the Scriptures ye may wax riper and stronger in your Ministry."

My next point is having reminded ourselves of the need, and of the mighty power of prayer, and of the high and heavenly calling of us who are called to minister in the Gospel, I would next like to emphasise that we above all others must be men of prayer. There is first of all prayer for our own individual lives, "take heed to yourselves." So much of our usefulness depends upon what we are. How often our messages are disregarded because of inconsistencies which our people readily note. I question whether any of us know how closely we are watched, and how much depends upon what we are. I remember hearing it said of one minister "that when he was in the pulpit he never ought to be out, and when he was out of the pulpit he never ought to be in." It may be said this is a solitary case, but I fear there are others of whom it may be said. We must live Christ as well as preach Christ. I remember hearing of one who had been converted through a prison chaplain. The chaplain had never even spoken to him, but used to pass daily where this man was, and had just smiled as he passed, and doubtless had prayed for him ; it led to his conviction and conversion. One might multiply instances of men and women whose lives have been changed, not by anything that has been said, but simply by the power of some man or woman's life. If a man is full of the Holy Ghost, I venture to think his life is bound to speak, whether he knows it or not, and if we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit, one of the means by which such a blessing is to come to us, is prayer. "If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that *ask* Him." We must needs then pray for our own individual life, but we must pray also for the flock committed to our charge. We must know them, we must work for them and with them, we must teach them, we must preach to them, and maybe warn them, but over and above all we must pray for them. I know not what may be the experience of my brethren here, but for my own part I feel more and more as I grow older my utter dependence on prayer, rather on a prayer-hearing God ; and that all our work is utterly useless and worthless without prayer. Every revival of which I have ever heard or read was born out of prayer, sometimes of days and

weeks and months of prayer; the men who have been mightily used of God in the salvation of souls would be the first to confess that the blessing came in answer to prayer. Look at David Brainerd—the Apostle to the Indians, and remember how that gracious manifestation of God's power was preceded by days and nights of agony in prayer, or, again, the Welsh Revival, and many other instances.

Then again, not only in the conversion of souls, but in our teaching and building up of our people, we need the teaching of the Spirit. If we are to teach others we ourselves must be taught of God, and that teaching can only come in answer to prayer. In dealing with souls how helpless we are, except as God gives us wisdom in answer to prayer.

We go to the Word of God, and we read there not only the command to pray, but we have numerous examples both in the Old Testament and in the New; look at Moses' intercession on behalf, of a disobedient and gainsaying people; look at Hezekiah, when faced by a blasphemous and threatening heathen king; look at Elijah, who "prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it rained not for the space of three years and six months." Look at the Apostle Paul, how he travailed in birth until Christ was formed in his hearers, but over and above all, look at the example of our blessed Master, the High and Holy One, the only begotten Son of God. What an example He has set us; how He spent whole nights in prayer. If He needed it, how infinitely more must we poor fallen creatures.

But, my brethren, there is prayer and prayer; there is the mere formal lip service, and there is the waiting upon God, the pouring out of the soul in prayer, the agonizing and wrestling in prayer. This alone can rightly be called prayer; we may exhort one another to prayer, we may feel our need of prayer, but the prayer that tells, the prayer that changes things, the effectual fervent prayer, is prayer in the Holy Ghost. Prayer that is first breathed into us by the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, then, let me point out what is the subject of my paper, viz. the place of prayer in the minister's life, and I answer unhesitatingly, the *first* place. In these days multifarious duties call us, much more than in days gone by, and I fear the consequence has been in many cases that the prayer life has had to suffer. In speaking of prayer, I am thinking of private prayer. The public prayer in which it is our duty and privilege to lead, will be a very

poor thing, as regards our own spiritual life, unless it has been prepared for by private prayer. One of the dangers of a set form of prayer, I always feel, is that we are so apt to go through our beautiful liturgy without realising the words we are uttering. I know I constantly have to pray that I may really feel and mean the words I utter, and even then I often find myself reading a prayer through with scarcely one thought of the words which I have uttered.

Public prayer can never, and must never, take the place of private prayer. Prayer must come before and precede our preaching; a sermon that has had but little prayer will have little results. Let us prepare our sermons by all means; I mean in the way of the study of the Word and other books, but let us never forget the preparation upon the knees, and if time fails us, do not let the prayer preparation suffer. Then there is the sick and general visiting; this, if it is to be useful and blest must be preceded by prayer. Prayerless visiting will be but lost labour. It is well for us to pray ere going forth that God may prepare the way in the hearts to whom we are going, and that He may prepare us to speak the right word. I am not forgetting the need of the Word in our private and ministerial life. That Word must be the food of our souls, we *must be* able ministers of the New Testament, but it will only be in answer to prayer for the teaching of the Holy Spirit that we shall get the marrow and fatness of the Word.

So that though we must on no account neglect the Word, yet even that must be preceded by prayer. Then, with regard to the many other things which go to make up the parochial life of to-day, they must on *no account* take the place of prayer; if there is time for both, well and good, but if not, some of these things must go, and not cut short the prayer time. It is said that Sir Henry Havelock, when going through the Indian campaign, always gave the first two hours of the day to prayer and study of God's Word, and if the camp struck at six o'clock, he was up by four. Probably some of us would do better and more lasting work if some of the many things that engage us in our parochial life were given up, or left to some of our lay brethren, and we gave more time to prayer. It would be good for us if we would get back to apostolic practices, and "gave ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."